

ATTITUDES OF THAI MEDICAL STUDENTS TOWARDS PSYCHIATRY: A STUDY AT PRINCE OF SONGKLA UNIVERSITY



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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To compare attitudes towards psychiatry in sixth year medical students, before and after their psychiatric rotation.

METHOD: "Attitudes towards psychiatry" questionnaires (ATP-30) were given to students two times, on the first and the last day of their rotation. Data are presented in percentages, means, and standard deviation. Statistical comparisons were undertaken using SPSS.

RESULTS: Most students (50.8%) were female with a mean age of 23.7 + 2.4 yrs. Their attitudes toward psychiatry were generally positive both before and after rotation. Gender of medical students was not found to correlate with attitude and there was no significant change in attitude after their psychiatric clerkship. However, there was a tendency for medical students to choose strongly agree, agree, or neutral to the item "I would like to be a psychiatrist" rather than choosing strongly disagree after completing their clerkship.

CONCLUSION: There was no significant change in most of the 6th year medical students during their clerkship which may be due to a previous exposure to psychiatry in their fourth year, and experiencing some mentally ill patients in a previous internal medicine clerkship. Further research is needed to follow up these attitudes when they become doctors and also to compare attitudes with medical students who have learned in other universities in Thailand.

KEY WORDS: attitude, psychiatry, psychiatrist, medical students

INTRODUCTION

Thailand is located in Southeast Asia and its population is approximately 62 million. The number of psychiatrists is insufficient, with 403 psychiatrists serving the whole nation, or one psychiatrist for every 153,846 people. However, this number, of 403 psychiatrists, is taken from the Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health¹, while the number of members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists of Thailand (RCPT), as of

September 2002, is 304 psychiatrists, 2 or one psychiatrist for every 203,947 people. Some board - certified psychiatrists do not apply to be a member of the RCPT, so the actual number of psychiatrists in Thailand should be between 304 and 403. Whichever number is correct, it will be appreciated that there is a severe shortage of psychiatrists in Thailand, which has an equally severe effect on our mental health service.

Recently, a director of Srithunya Psychiatric Hospital blamed social stigma for this shortage of psychiatrists, telling a newspaper that medical students tended not to enter the field for fear of being stigmatized³. Hence, medical students' attitudes towards psychiatry and mental illness are very important, not only for the future care of psychiatric patients but also for the number of medical graduates choosing careers in psychiatry⁴.

Moreover, encouraging medical students to develop

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positive attitude towards psychiatry and psychiatric patients is an important aspect of clinical teaching in psychiatry⁵. Several previous studies have found that medical students undertaking psychiatric clerkship do develop more positive attitudes towards psychiatry⁶⁻⁹. However, no significant change in attitude was found in other studies^{5,10}, including a study at our university (Prince of Songkla University, PSU.) 13 years ago. One of the reasons used to explain the stability of PSU students' attitudes was the fluency in the English language of the medical students, as the authors used the original English version of ATP-30 (Attitude Towards Psychiatry - 30 items) to measure attitude¹¹.

Therefore, the aim of this study was to reassess changes in the attitudes of medical students before and after undertaking psychiatric clerkship, using the Thai version of ATP-30.

Table: 1 Demographic data of respondents

Sex:	Male	31(49.2%)
	Female	32(50.8%)
Age:	Mean (S.D.)	23.7(2.4%)
Region in Thailand:	North	1 (1.6%)
	Northeast	2 (3.2%)
	East	2 (3.2%)
	Central	7 (11.1%)
	South	47 (74.6%)
	No answer	4 (6.4%)

METHOD

The first group of 6th year medical students (n = 65) at PSU who rotated to psychiatric clerkship from March to August 2002 were enrolled in the study. In accordance with ethics committee guidelines, medical students had to sign informed consent forms before participation. Only two male students did not want to participate in this study.

The ATP-30 questionnaire was given to students two times. The initial survey was conducted on the first day of their rotation and the second survey was performed on the last day. We also interviewed medical students on the last day when they completed their psychiatric clerkship to find out more information about management of the educational process to facilitate improvement of knowledge and attitudes towards psychiatry.

Percentages of the respondents' demographic data were reported. Other results were presented as means and standard deviation. Statistical comparisons were undertaken using SPSS.

RESULTS

In terms of demographic data, most of the students were female (50.8%) and 49.2% were male. The mean age and S.D. were 23.7 + 2.4 years. Nearly three quarters of the students (74.6%) came from the southern part of Thailand (Table 1).

The maximum ATP-30 score is 150, the higher the score, the more positive the attitude. The results of dividing the ATP-30 score into 4 related subgroups is shown in Table 2.

In all of these scores, before and after psychiatric rotation, there was no statistically significant difference in any of the 4 subgroups or the total ATP-30 scores. Also, we could find no influence of gender on the total ATP score (Table 3).

Regarding item number 4, "I would like to be a psychiatrist"(Table 4), it was found that the number of students who agreed, disagreed, or were neutral did not change significantly after the clerkship. However, there was a tendency that students who gave no answer before rotation did make a decision after completing their clerkship, and 11 students who did not give an answer before rotation showed a tendency to choose strongly agree, agree, or neutral rather than choosing strongly disagree.

Table: 2 Comparison of ATP - 30 scores before and after psychiatric rotation.

ATP - 30	Maximum Score *	Before		After		P
		Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Total ATP - 30 Score	150	110.17	10.28	111.37	11.33	0.306
A4	20	15.78	2.02	15.82	1.96	0.885
A11	55	39.87	4.46	40.25	4.04	0.445
A7	35	24.37	3.06	25.06	3.50	0.138
A8	40	29.60	3.44	29.82	3.56	0.626

* maximum score possible if all answers are in strong agreement
 A4 = items 12, 18, 27, 29
 A11 = items 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 11, 15, 17, 21, 22, 28
 A7 = items 9, 10, 13, 23, 24, 26, 30
 A8 = items 3, 5, 8, 14, 16, 19, 20, 25
 [Where:
 A4 = attitude towards mental illness and patients
 A11 = attitude towards psychiatry and psychiatrists
 A7 = attitude towards psychiatric teaching and knowledge
 A8 = attitude towards psychiatric treatment and hospital]

Table: 3 Comparison of ATP - 30 scores in male and female medical students.

ATP-30 Score	Before		After		P
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	
Male	108.80	2.78	112.22	3.06	0.777
Female	109.65	1.63	110.82	1.95	0.678

Table: 4 Number and percentage of students who responded to item 4 "I would like to be a psychiatrist".

Response	Before (n = 63) n (%)	After (n = 63) n (%)
Strongly agree	1 (1.6)	2 (3.2)
Agree	9 (14.3)	12 (19.0)
Neutral	16 (25.4)	20 (31.7)
Disagree	17 (27.0)	17 (27.0)
Strongly disagree	9 (14.3)	10 (15.9)
No answer	11 (17.4)	2 (3.2)

Table: 5 Comparison of ATP - 30 scores in PSU medical students between this study and the previous report.

ATP-30	4 th year students (1989) Pre (n = 80) Post (n = 81)		6 th year students (2002) Pre (n = 63) Post (n = 63)	
	Mean ± S.D.	Mean ± S.D.	Mean ± S.D.	Mean ± S.D.
Total ATP-30 score	102.67 ± 10.50	103.54 ± 11.99	110.17 ± 10.28	111.37 ± 11.33
A4	14.15 ± 2.32	14 ± 2.14	15.78 ± 2.02	15.82 ± 1.96
A11	37.76 ± 4.99	38.26 ± 5.09	39.87 ± 4.46	40.25 ± 4.04
A7	23.27 ± 3.15	23.95 ± 3.81	24.37 ± 3.06	25.06 ± 3.50
A8	27.49 ± 3.31	27.65 ± 4.34	29.60 ± 3.44	29.82 ± 3.56

[Where:
 A4 = attitude towards mental illness and patients
 A11 = attitude towards psychiatry and psychiatrists
 A7 = attitude towards psychiatric teaching and knowledge
 A8 = attitude towards psychiatric treatment and hospital]

Table: 6 Comparison of item 4 "I would like to be a psychiatrist" in PSU medical students between this study and the previous report.

Response	4 th year students (1989) Pre (n = 80) Post (n = 81)		6 th year students (2002) Pre (n = 63) Post (n = 63)	
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Agree and strongly agree	20 (25)	12 (14)	10 (22.9)	
Neutral	29 (36.3)	33 (40.7)	16 (25.4)	20 (31.7)
Disagree and strongly disagree	31 (38.7)	36 (44.5)	26 (41.3)	27 (42.9)
No answer	0 (0)	0 (0)	11 (17.4)	2 (3.2)

DISCUSSION

Our findings were rather similar to previous studies from Australia⁵ and Germany¹². A study of 105 German medical students, using a German translation of the ATP-30¹², found that their attitudes toward psychiatry were generally positive with a total ATP-30 score of 104.6 + 13.4. Moreover, both the German and our studies found no gender difference on attitudes toward psychiatry. A study from Adelaide, Australia also found that gender of medical students was not correlated with attitudes⁵. Regarding the effect of the psychiatric clerkship, no significant change in attitude was found in our study, which was similar to a study from Adelaide, when measuring attitudes before and after the sixth - year psychiatric clerkship⁵.

Additional data obtained by interviewing the students found that the reason for no significant change in attitudes was a previous 4-week exposure to psychiatry in their fourth year, and perhaps some experience with suicidal patients in their internal medicine clerkship in the fourth, fifth, and sixth years. Many students participating in our interview reported that their attitudes were rather negative before rotating to psychiatry in the fourth year. They were afraid of psychiatric patients and did not have enough scientific knowledge of psychiatry. By the time they had experienced many persons with mental disorders,

however, their attitudes changed to a more favorable and positive outlook.

When comparing our data with a previous study of PSU 4th year medical students, it is noted that the current 6th year students had more positive attitudes than their 4th year colleagues in both total and all subgroups of ATP-30 scores (Table 5).

This may be because experiencing more mentally ill patients in the previous two years gave them more favorable attitudes, or perhaps students just simply understood the Thai version of ATP-30 in our study much better than the original English version used in the previous study. However, if we look at item number 4 "I would like to be a psychiatrist" there was a tendency to choose agree and strongly agree in the 6th year more so than in the 4th year, which may be partly due to the effect of the psychiatric clerkship (Table 6).

A previous comparative study between Thai and Japanese students measured attitudes towards persons with mental disorders of first - year students and last - year students who had completed their psychiatric curriculum. This study found that students who had completed their learning had a more unfavorable attitude than students who had not done so. Thai students indicated more unfavorable attitudes than did their Japanese counterparts. However, different questionnaires, Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons Scale [ATDP] and the Contact with Disabled Persons Scale [CDP], a different research design, and different settings (Chiang Mai University, Northern Thailand) make it difficult to compare this with our study. Before a general hypothesis conclusion of attitudes towards psychiatry in Thai medical students can be advanced, further research using similar questionnaires, i. e. the ATP-30, should be conducted in universities located in different parts of Thailand.

In conclusion, our preliminary result indicates no significant change in total ATP-30 scores and subgroups of ATP-30 scores of most of the students. The number of medical students who agreed, disagreed, or were neutral to the item "I would like to be a psychiatrist" did not change significantly after the clerkship, however, it was likely that medical students who did not give an answer before rotation could make a decision afterwards whether or not he/she would consider choosing psychiatry as a career. A follow up of these attitudes toward psychiatry when the students graduate and become doctors is also recommended for further research.

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