OP 6

Awareness of autism spectrum disorder among final year medical students and public health midwives

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Introduction: Early identification of the autism spectrum disorder is vital because early intervention is associated with a better prognosis for the child. Basic knowledge is vital for early diagnosis.

Objectives: To assess the knowledge on awareness of autism spectrum disorder among final year medical students and public health midwives.

Methods: This was an institution-based prospective cross-sectional descriptive study carried out at Faculty of Medicine, University of Jaffna and Regional Director of Health Services (RDHS) office, Jaffna. All final-year medical students from the Faculty of Medicine University of Jaffna, and all the Public health midwives working under the RDHS office Jaffna were recruited. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect the data. The knowledge of autism was assessed using a validated Knowledge about Childhood Autism among Health Workers questionnaire, an open-access tool. Results were analyzed using a student's t-test to compare the mean and a p-value < 0.05 was considered as significant. Pearson correlation was done to see the correlation and the value < 0.19 was considered as very weak correlation and >0.8 was considered as very strong correlation and the correlation is considered as significant when p is <0.05.

Results: A total of 314 participants, 136 medical students (43%) and 178 family health midwives (57%) participated in the study. The mean total score was $12.79/19 \pm 3.06$. The mean score was high for the medical students when compared to public health midwives (13.88 Vs 11.96) and the difference is statistically significant (p=0.007). Scores in reciprocal social interactions, impairment in communication were higher when compared to scores in stereotypical behaviour pattern, and common associations of autism. The mean score was high among the medical students, who completed clinical rotation in psychiatry. (15.42 Vs 12.89 p=0.001). A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the linear relationship between the mean knowledge score and the duration of the services of the family health midwives. There was a weak positive correlation but it is not statistically significant. {r (178) = 0.143 p=0.058}.

Conclusion: The study revealed that there was satisfactory knowledge of childhood autism among final-year medical students and public health midwives. The scores were higher in medical students who completed clinical rotation in psychiatry.

Keywords: Childhood autism, Knowledge, Medical-students, Public health midwives