

EDITORIAL

**SHOULD MEDICAL STUDENTS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS
BE ALLOWED TO BECOME DOCTORS?**

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Over the recent years, too many complaints have been heard from employers, at least, in the scenario of Malaysian hospitals, that more and more housemen are becoming “problematic” and not being able to function adequately. Too many a time, mental health problem or illness is being blamed as the culprit, leaving a negative impression on mental health and psychiatric profession. This is a disconcerting issue, which needs to be addressed. Is this a result of a sin committed by medical universities for producing unfit doctors? Is this due to unconducive working environment that may trigger mental health problems among the young doctors? Or are there other reasons contributing to this phenomenon? These questions remain difficult to be answered as, to our knowledge, there has not been any systematic enquiry looking into this issue.

The whole issue needs to be tackled systematically from different angles. There is a need to profile these “problematic” doctors in terms of the underlying reasons contributing to their inability to function. Is it true that they suffer from mental illness? If so, are they receiving adequate treatment before they are judged as not being able to function? Secondly, there is a need to backdate their conditions as to when these problems may have started, whether they have already surfaced during their medical course or even before.

As psychiatrists working in a medical university whose job involve providing treatment and care for medical students who have mental health problem or illness during their medical course, we feel responsible if our decisions in supporting them to pursue their course may

jeopardize the standard of care provided by them after they graduate. Important to note here, this is not a straightforward or easy decision to make. Firstly, mental illnesses in this era of advanced psychopharmacology and other treatment interventions are generally treatable whereby a person can achieve a state of remission adequate for effective functioning. Theoretically, if the affected persons continue to adhere to their treatment, they have the chances of functioning reasonably well. Secondly, predicting which students would fare later in their working life better than the others it is not straightforward task. Even, milder conditions, which are seemingly easier to treat may not guarantee a good functioning later among the affected persons as we know factors contributing to the progression of mental illness are multiple. Thirdly, this is also about individuals’ right to pursue their dreams in life, which may involve becoming doctors. Everybody should be given equal chance to live life to the fullest capacity. Making them leave the course is like robbing their chances to achieve their purpose in life and may worsen the situation for the affected persons and their families.

However, it is indeed important to ensure, as much as possible, that only students who are fit to practice to be allowed to become doctors. Doctors have responsibilities different from other professionals in the nature of their day-to-day job, which almost always involves decision making on patients’ health and safety. Therefore, it is a basic requirement for them to have a sound judgment at all time while working; a situation, which may be impaired by mental illness. Counseling students with mental illnesses, which are relatively more challenging

to treat in the long term to leave medical course is a logical solution to be practiced by medical universities.

So far, this issue has been dealt with by the different universities on individual basis. To the best of our knowledge, there is no standard guideline for medical universities in making decisions related to this issue.

In conclusion, the issue of fitness to practice among young doctors who seem to be having problems to function well needs to be studied systematically and a guideline on fitness to practice needs to be formulated to be followed by medical universities which has mushroomed in number over the recent years. There are useful

guidelines [1, 2], which can be used as a reference for this purpose.

References

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