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Promotion of Psychiatry for Undergraduate Medical Students

Indian Psychiatry Society (IPS) organised an Undergraduate Orientation Program to promote psychiatry as a promising career among medical students on Tuesday, 4th August 2020 at GMERS auditorium, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. The event was supported by World Psychiatric Association (WPA) Action Plan working group on Medical Students, Asian Federation of Psychiatrist Association (AFPA), & Gujarat Medical Education & Research Society (GMERS) Medical college & Hospital.

As the College & Hospital Campus is Apex COVID care unit of the Ahmedabad City, about 150 students were allowed to attend following all Measures of Health & Family welfare Guideline issued by Government of India.

The Dean of GMERS Medical college & Gujarat Medical council President Prof. Nitin Vora welcomed the gathering, and explained the need of basic psychiatric knowledge at Undergraduate level in general and in the difficult times of COVID19 in particular.

The Dean of N.H.L. Municipal Medical college Prof. Pratik Patel Introduced the theme and Prof Ajesh Desai, Prof Aparajita Shukla & Prof Pina Soni Heads of other institutions in Gujarat also welcomed the students.

The WPA President Elect, Professor Afzal Javed in his message expressed that mental illness cause the maximum burden on world economy and the lack of awareness and education compound this situation. During the exceptional times of pandemic every individual understood the bitter truth of “how psyche supersedes the soma”. Depression, for example, will be a leading cause of global disability & this makes even more important that at undergraduate medical education level, we all need to understand the need to bridge the gap in our practices and medical students to understand importance of mental health.

Prof. Javed went on to discuss the need to involve co care approach for mix gastro-enterology, neurology and rheumatology cases with a psychiatrist. Many a times individuals present as common mental health problems or as a comorbid condition and are either missed or inappropriately managed.

Prof Javed also lamented the negative image of psychiatry and psychiatrists, citing as examples the underestimation of psychiatry and unjustified prejudices from the general public, mass media & healthcare professionals, as well as psychiatry’s own inability to cope favourably with external and internal concerns.

The president elect of Asian Federation of Psychiatry Association & Past President Indian Psychiatry society Dr G Prasad Rao through an online session during this programme emphasised the need of mental health awareness among the undergraduate students. He advised the students to enquire about mental health issues while taking history as “They will not express until you don’t ask” He further added “Psychiatric illness have always prevailed due to myths and misinformation. Referral rates to a psychiatrist are poor in India and in spite of almost a third of population of patients attending the OPD are suffering from psychosomatic illness.

President of Indian Psychiatry Society Dr PK Dalal in his message highlighted World Health Organization statement “No health without mental health”. He also expressed the rising importance of psychiatry, behavioural neurosciences and neuropsychiatry in the last few decades. Mental health needs to be integrated into all aspects of health and social policy, health-system planning, and delivery of primary, secondary and tertiary general health care.

In India, the psychiatrist to patient ratio was very scarce. The COVID-19 has brought a renewed focus on mental health in the world and the need for more mental health professionals is evident.

Dr. Mrugesh Vaishnav Immediate Past President of Indian Psychiatry Society, who was the key-note speaker, sharing his insights highlighted the importance of psychological first aid for all the patients admitted for COVID 19 related illnesses. “A mentally happy brain helps body to recover from all diseases, if the battle is lost mentally, it is not possible to conquer this virus”.

While encouraging & motivating the students to pursue psychiatry as a specialty in their post graduate course Dr Vaishnav debunked the myths surrounding psychiatry. “India is a country of 1.3 billion brains and these very brains will require support, care and appropriate treatment from best mental health care professionals. One of you can one day emulate the efforts of millions of doctors and improve the mental health scenario of our country which has maximum young population in the world.

Dr. Vaishnav specified that the times of COVID 19 have highlighted the role of psychiatrists and our country lacks the required network to help every Indian out there. Pre-existing psychiatric comorbidities have already been established in 30% of patients attending regular internal medicine OPDs. We are in an era of consultation liaison psychiatry and all the students who out of choice opt for other medical or surgical specialties should attend all of their clinics during their education period and help patients suffering from medical and psychiatric co morbidities.

Dr. Vaishnav said that India needs awakened, interested and knowledgeable doctors who choose psychiatry as their post graduate branch. The fight against COVID 19 is only the beginning to an already existing mental health pandemic. India is a country of spirituality and philosophy & by embracing the neurobiology, we can transform the progress our nation can achieve the supreme as we gradually come out of the aftermaths of the deadly viral infection.

Explaining about the burnout a medical student can experience during undergraduate and post graduate education Dr Vaishnav elaborated the idea of Mental health for all. “Almost every student suffers from stress, burnout and many times depression. Students don’t talk about mental health openly due to shame and stigma. Medical student suicide is on an alarming rise, and we need support groups, regular sessions and official algorithms to help all medical students. Looking at COVID scenario doctors will be the backbone to uplift our nation which as on today has 3rd highest number of infected cases in the world and if these doctors are already burned out before they can serve the nation, we have an army of soldiers who cannot fight their enemy.

All the students were offered individual help by Indian Psychiatry Society. Support to the paramedical staff, hospital administrators and housekeeping personnel during these times was explained and the idea of a unified healthcare system of team of medical personnel with paramedics to reduce individual burnout was well taken by the audiences.

Authors: Prof. Rishikesh Jadav, Prof. & Head, Anatomy, GMERS medical college, Sola. Dr Gaurang Thanki, President Elect, Indian Psychiatry society Gujarat state branch.