



Review Article

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Mental Health of Medical Students in Culturally Diverse Learning Environments: Literature Review

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Abstract

Studying medicine abroad becomes more and more popular for many students worldwide. However, the demanding academic environment of medical school, combined with the competitiveness of the field, often leaves students facing unmet expectations. Unlike the idealized image of the wealthy international student that many people have in mind, many overseas students struggle with daily life and interactions in an unusual environment. Factors such as challenges from the host country, social pressures, academic difficulties, and language barriers create a perfect storm that puts these students at a higher risk of developing anxiety and depression. All of this, of course, makes it difficult for students to achieve their main goal: to become high-class professionals and pursue successful careers. Given the increasing population of international students and the lack of research concerning their mental health, it has become increasingly important to understand the usual and unique challenges they face.

Keywords: Mental health, Medical students, Multicultural diversity

Introduction

Studying medicine is often seen as a noble pursuit for many students worldwide. The idea of travelling abroad for education is frequently romanticized as a journey of self-discovery and exploration. However, the demanding academic environment of medical school, combined with the competitiveness of the field, often leaves students facing unmet expectations. Unlike the idealized image of the wealthy international student that many people have in mind, many overseas students struggle with daily life and interactions in a foreign environment. Financial stressors contribute to the psychological distress these students experience [7]. Factors such as challenges from the host country, social pressures, academic difficulties, and language barriers create a perfect storm that puts these students at a higher risk of developing anxiety and depression. All of this, of course, makes it difficult for students to achieve their main goal: to become high-class professionals and pursue successful careers.

In recent years, Georgia has emerged as a popular destination for aspiring doctors from around the globe. The country attracts students with its relatively affordable tuition fees, globally recognized universities, and multicultural environment [8]. However, for those who have never left their hometowns, this multicultural setting can serve as a double-edged sword. Arriving in Georgia as a new medical student feels like stepping into a world filled with contrasts, blending ancient history with modern ambitions, all set against the backdrop of friendly Georgian hosts. According to Geostat, during the 2022-2023 academic year, there was a notable 43% increase in the enrolment of foreign students in Georgian higher education compared to previous years [4]. Given this increasing population of international students and the lack of research concerning their mental health, it has become increasingly important to understand the usual and unique challenges they face. The psychological well-being of medical students has been a topic of con-



cern worldwide, with studies showing an elevated risk of anxiety and depression within this population.

Literature Review

The prevalence of depression and anxiety among medical students around the world is on the rise, potentially exacerbated by academic pressures, unmet expectations, language barriers, and cultural challenges. At Tbilisi State Medical University, a striking 93.33% of students reported experiencing depressive symptoms [19]. It is crucial to address these mental health issues to support the well-being of future medical professionals. Given the demanding and often challenging environment of medical school, it is crucial to consider the various factors that could contribute to the decline in students' mental well-being. Foreign students, in particular, may be at higher risk due to reasons such as language barriers and adapting to a new environment, as argued by Hunt and Eisenberg [9]. In a study conducted over the mental health of US students in Italy it was found that 40% of students suffered from minimal depression, 1% suffered from severe depression., with the most commonly reported depressive symptoms included lack of energy, sleep problems, and eating problems. As the number of international medical students increases significantly every year, due to this, the mental health concerns among medical students have been more thoroughly documented in recent years. The reported percentage of international students who believe they have "bad mental health" is 36% [17]. These issues primarily arise from the intense pressure, academic stress, and demanding responsibilities characteristic of the medical school environment. Research indicates that symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress are significantly more prevalent among medical students compared to their peers in other fields. It is essential to differentiate between the demanding requirements of the medical field and how those at higher risk can manage them healthily. While many doctors acknowledge the importance of diagnosing individual cases, others caution that this could lead to unhelpful categorization and the medicalization of normal human suffering, potentially resulting in over-diagnosis and unnecessary treatment [6].

Medical students generally share similar personality traits that may enable them to cope with the pressures of medical school better than one might expect, given the challenging circumstances. Research has shown that student satisfaction and dissatisfaction are linked to individual mindsets. For example, a study by *Lohse et al.* identified a group of medical students as 'type A,' who exhibited higher competitive attitudes, ambition, and an inner drive to work harder than their 'type B' counterparts. Furthermore, a study conducted in Bahrain by *Alfulaijj and Alnasir* [3] found that 76% of medical students were categorized as type A, with this personality type being more prevalent among female students. However, despite the commendable achievements of highly driven and ambitious students, they are just as susceptible to mental fatigue and depression. It was noted that type A medical students may struggle to allocate time for relaxation, and their perfectionist tendencies may increase their risk of experiencing depression.

Tyssen, et al. [18] discovered that students characterized by high conscientiousness and neuroticism are at a greater risk for mental illness, whereas students with lower levels of these traits, as well as higher extroversion, are more protected from deterioration in their mental health. Extroversion typically allows students to be more outgoing and sociable, helping to alleviate feelings of isolation, especially for those who are foreign to the country in which they study. Although depression in medical school is a complex issue affecting a significant portion of this population, it is crucial to examine the factors contributing to this issue. The community of foreign students in multicultural environments often experiences higher levels of stress, which can lead to other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Research indicates that 50.8% of these students may be more vulnerable to depression and emotional distress, while 10.1% are at very high risk within the international and overseas student population [17]. Although anxiety is common in this population, it is often under-identified and under-treated; current literature reveals that anxiety is also significantly under-researched compared to other psychological issues, such as depression. The global prevalence of anxiety among medical students is reported to be 33.8%, with even higher rates among students from Asia and the Middle East [15].

Medical students, faced with the challenging environment of hospital training, have been found to be more prone to stress, anxiety, and depression [16]. This susceptibility may be exacerbated by mistreatment and abuse from clinical supervisors. During their clinical years, students encounter death for the first time and must navigate the complexities of dealing with patients and their caregivers. Given these increased responsibilities, it is crucial that students have more resources available than they did in their pre-clinical years. Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding mental health issues is particularly pronounced within the medical community, making it difficult for students and young doctors to seek professional help, as doing so can be viewed as a sign of weakness. A study conducted by *Chew-Graham, et al.* [5] at the University of Manchester in the UK revealed that while many medical students could acknowledge the stress present in their education, they were often reluctant to seek help due to the stigma associated with mental illness, especially in relation to medical professionals.

This issue may be even more pronounced for students studying abroad, who face additional challenges such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, and feelings of isolation. Cultural and linguistic differences significantly impact the mental health of students studying abroad. A study by *O'Reilly, Ryan* [12], found that a strong level of social support helps international students build friendships with people from the host country or from other countries. Additionally, students who struggle with language proficiency are at a heightened risk of contributing to anxiety and feelings of inadequacy among students. Research [13] indicates that foreign language anxiety is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by various factors, including personality traits, learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and the overall learning environment. This is partic-

ularly relevant in the multicultural educational settings of Georgian universities, where students from diverse backgrounds must find common ground while working and studying together.

At Georgian Universities, the diverse environment, combined with the language barriers often experienced between non-Georgian students and doctors or patients, appears to significantly impact the stress levels of international students [1]. The struggle to master the language of instruction can take a considerable toll on these students. According to Yan and Pei [21], long-term difficulties in adjusting to the language negatively affect their academic performance. In countries where the local language is the primary language used in education; international students often struggle with the overall adjustment process. A study on international students in Turkey revealed both qualitative and quantitative results indicating significant stress related to language barriers and their impact on academic achievement [11]. Many international students find it challenging to understand spoken language and interpret it in different contexts, which can negatively affect their mental health.

Social and emotional support systems are crucial in mitigating mental health concerns. According to Alan Mcluckie, *et al.* [2] medical students and residents who felt unsupported during their studies and training experienced psychological distress and higher levels of burnout, leading them to contemplate dropping out. Research emphasizes the importance of universities focusing on the well-being of their students and supporting them in managing the thoughts and feelings that arise during their programs. In a multicultural educational environment, these stressors may be amplified and often overlooked, even by the students themselves, due to a lack of community and social support. Social isolation is another significant contributor to mental health issues among international students. The absence of familial and familiar social networks in a foreign country intensifies feelings of loneliness and lack of support. A study conducted at Pennsylvania State University (PSU) with 198 international students identified loneliness as the fourth most prevalent psychological stressor, with over 25% of participants reporting such feelings [14]. Many international students compare their daily routine to a pendulum, constantly swinging between their academic environment and home, often going an entire day without interacting with anyone.

Research by Mehrete, *et al.* [10] revealed that all participants among international students at U.S. universities reported experiencing loneliness and social isolation, which contributed to feelings of perceived xenophobia. These experiences led to depression, disinterest in forming connections, and reluctance to attend social events on campus. In multicultural universities, while diversity is celebrated, the formation of exclusive cultural subgroups can negatively impact students and discourage broader social integration, creating a dual challenge of inclusion and alienation for international students [20].

Conclusion

Studying medicine abroad can be an exciting journey, but it

also presents significant mental health challenges for international students. In Georgia, which has become an increasingly popular destination for foreign medical students, factors such as academic pressure, language barriers, cultural adaptation, and social isolation contribute to high levels of anxiety and depression. Research shows that medical students, especially those in multicultural environments, face a greater risk of mental health issues due to unmet expectations, competitive atmospheres, and difficulties adjusting to a new country. Despite growing awareness of these issues, mental health concerns among medical students remain under-researched, particularly in Georgian universities. To address these challenges, it is essential to establish better support systems, raise awareness, and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health within the medical community.

Finally, given the increasing population of international medical students in Georgia and the lack of research in this area, it is important to investigate the prevalence and causes of mental health issues within this high-risk population, which has been identified in various regions around the world. We believe that research in this field could open new avenues for addressing and destigmatizing mental health issues within the medical community globally. With a well-established medical school environment, Georgian universities may play a pivotal role in advancing medical education worldwide.

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