

Knowledge and attitudes towards mental health patients' rights among mental health professionals

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Abstract

Introduction: It is well known that people with psychiatric disorders experience violations of their human rights. Both knowledge and attitude of mental health professionals could play a core role in guaranteeing the rights of this sensitive patient population. The aim of the present study was to explore the attitudes of mental health professionals, psychiatrists and nurses, towards mental health patients and to determine the level of knowledge towards their rights.

Method: The study was carried out at the Psychiatric Hospital of Thessaloniki among a sample of 166 mental health professionals (psychiatrists and nurses). A questionnaire, consisting of four parts, was designed for the purpose of the study.

Results: Of the total study population 68.7% were nurses and 25.3% were psychiatrists. Our findings suggest that the higher level of education is associated with a more positive attitude towards mental health patients, the attitude of mental health professionals towards the patients depends on the knowledge they have of their rights and also that psychiatrists who have a mental health patient in their family have a more positive attitude towards these patients than nurses.

Conclusion: Since knowledge of mental health patient's rights implies a better attitude towards these patients, initiatives to inform and educate mental health professionals on these rights should be further encouraged.

Key-words: Patients' Rights, Mental Health Care Professionals, Mental Health patients, Knowledge, Attitudes

INTRODUCTION

Human rights are ethical claims enshrined in national and international legal texts that aim to protect the individual from third party abuses but also to contribute to the promotion of his welfare. The World Health Organization defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity", linking health to human rights with a special reference to mental health. At international level, health is enshrined, *inter alia*, in the Treaties and Conventions of the International Organizations and the E.U. Charter of Fundamental Rights. The protection of the rights of persons with mental disorders is in the focus of several international conventions' resolutions and recommendations. The best known in this context are, among others: The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46(119) "Principles of the Protection of Persons with Mental Illness and for the Improvement of Mental Health Care" (1), the Recommendation R (83) 2 "The legal protection of persons suffering from a mental disorder placed as involuntary patients" and the Declaration of Hawaii / II (2). In Greece, health as an individual and social right is enshrined primarily in Constitution 1975/1986/2001/2008 (Article 5 (2), Article 7 (3) and Article 21). Particularly, patients' rights, including mental patients' rights, are expressly provided for by Article 47 of Law 2071/1992. Moreover, in every hospital there is established a Health Protection Officer's Office (3). However, even though patients' rights have been legally enforced, in practice patients' rights and especially mental health patients' rights are often violated. For this reason, it is necessary to pursue a holistic approach in order to protect them. What is needed though, is that all stakeholders, from the mental healthcare policy makers to the mental health professionals, to get actively involved in this effort.

According to various studies, negative attitudes, such as stigma (4) and fear (5) towards people with mental illness, are prevalent among mental health professionals. A study conducted in Brazil revealed that among a national sample of 1,414 psychiatrists, 42.9% of them were identified as having prejudicial behavior and high social distance to-

wards people with schizophrenia (6). Another study (7) by Nordt et al. showed that mental health professionals had multiple negative attitudes towards people with mental disorders which were like those the general public had. It is undeniable that negative attitudes could lower the quality of health care provided to people with mental illness (8), while both knowledge and attitude of mental health professionals could play a core role in guaranteeing the rights of patients (9).

Unlike a large amount of studies comparing attitudes of mental health professionals with other healthcare professionals (10, 11) or general public (12, 13, 14), fewer studies have been conducted to examine correlates of attitudes to mental illness among mental health professionals. In this respect, the aim of the present study was to explore the attitudes of mental health professionals, psychiatrists and nurses, towards mental health patients and to determine the level of knowledge towards mental health patients' rights.

METHODS

The study was carried out at the Psychiatric Hospital of Thessaloniki among mental health professionals (psychiatrists and nurses) working in acute ward clinics, rehabilitation clinics, out-of-hospital reintegration structures and the internal medicine clinic. A questionnaire consisting of four parts was designed for the purpose of the study. The first part included twelve questions about the general attitude of the participants in the research towards mental health patients. The second part included eighteen questions on knowledge of the existence of mental health patients' rights during their hospitalization in a psychiatric clinic, as well as whether psychiatrists and nurses know the status, the procedures and the legal framework applicable to involuntary hospitalization. The third part included five questions on whether the participants in the survey inform their patients about their rights and whether the mental health professionals themselves are informed and by whom about these rights. The fourth part included demographic param-

eters such as age, gender and type of profession (psychiatrist, nurse). The questionnaire was anonymous and was approved by the Scientific Council of the Psychiatric Hospital (protocol number: D3b / 24916 9-7-2018).

The data were analyzed using Statistical Package Software for Social Sciences (SPSS). Data were presented using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages. Chi-square test was used to compare the proportions among various groups and a P-value of <0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. Where the assumptions of the test were not satisfied with the data (especially when the reported frequencies were very small), the Fisher Exact Test was used.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics

In total, 166 mental health professionals participated in the study, 68.7% (n=114) of them were nurses and 25.3% (n=42) were psychiatrists. In 6% of the questionnaires the field of professional specialization was not filled in. Regarding the type of profession, psychiatrists were fewer than the nurses, however, the nurses working in the Psychiatric Hospital are more than the psychiatrists, so, proportionately, the number of psychiatrists who took part in the survey was weighted with the number of nurses. More than half of the sample (68.1 %, n=113) were females, 31.3% (n=52) were male. Ten of the participants did not fill in the age field (6%).

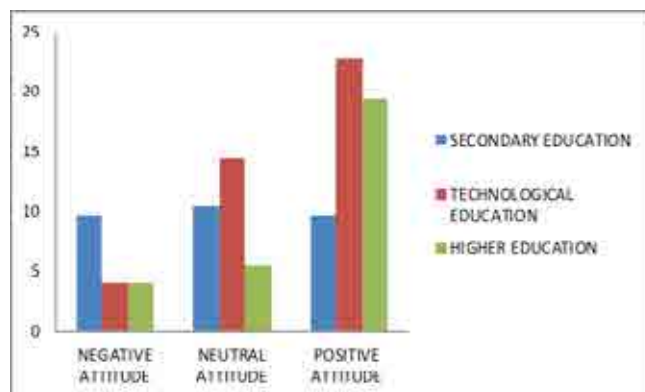
The age of the participants ranged between 18-66 years. The majority (67.5 %, n=103) were under 50 years of age. Almost half of the sample (47.6%, n=79) belonged to the age group of 36-50 years, followed by 50 years and over (31.9%, n=53). The majority (59.6%, n=99) of the respondents were married. 54.2% (n=90) of the participants had received higher education while 28.9% received secondary education. Among the psychiatrists, 28 had received higher education, 8 had a postgraduate degree and 5 had a doctorate degree, whereas 28.9% of the nurses had re-

ceived secondary education and 35.5% higher education. Regarding work experience in the field of health care, 42 mental healthcare professionals had up to 10 years of work experience (25.3%), 41 of the participants had 10-20 years of work experience (24.7%), 52 had 21-30 years of work experience (31.3%) and over 22 of the participants had more than 30 years of work experience (13.3%). Finally, 27 of the participants had a person in their family with mental illness; the psychiatrists had a person in the family with a mental illness to a greater extent (28.6%, n=12) than the nurses (13.2%, n=15).

Knowledge and attitudes

According to the results of the statistical analysis, the attitude of mental health professionals towards mental patients depends on their education. A significant correlation between the level of education and the attitude towards the mental health patients was found, the higher level of education is associated with a more positive attitude towards the patients (p=0.005) (Figure 1).

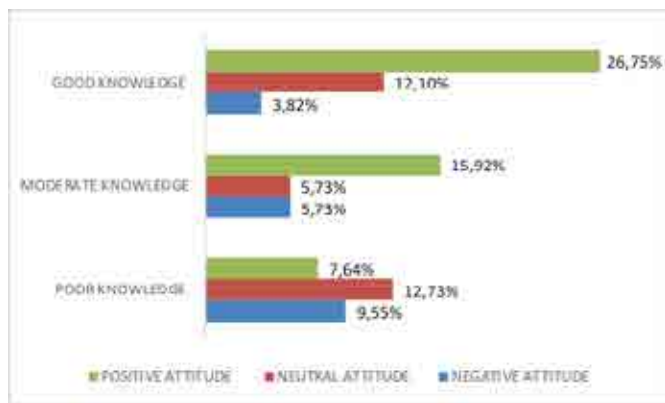
Figure 1: Correlation between attitude of mental health professionals towards mental health patients and their level of education



Another finding was that the attitude of mental health workers towards the patients depends on the knowledge that they have of their rights, since that knowledge both on the rights of mental health patients and the procedures

concerning involuntary hospitalization were associated positively with the attitude of mental health professionals towards the mentally ill ($p=0.001$) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Correlation between knowledge of mental health professionals regarding the human rights of mental health patients and their attitude towards them



Lastly, psychiatrists who have a patient with mental disorder in their family had a more positive attitude towards mental health patients than nurses ($p=0.014$) (Table 1).

According to our results no significant association was found between: the type of profession (psychiatrist or nurse) and the attitude towards mental health patients ($p=0.250$), the workplace and the attitude of the professionals towards the mental health patients ($p=0.456$), and patients' information about their rights and the level of education or type of profession of the professionals ($p=0.925$). In addition, a correlation between patient information about their rights and the age, gender, workplace and work-experience of the mental health professionals was not noticed. Moreover, no significant association was found between the knowledge on the rights of mental health patients both with level of education and work-experience of mental health professionals (Table 1).

Table 1: Knowledge and attitudes of mental health professionals towards mental health patients: positive and negative correlation

Positive correlation	Negative correlation
Attitude of mental health professionals towards mental patients depends on their education ($p=0.005$)	Attitude of mental health professionals towards mental patients does not depend on the type of their profession ($p=0.250$)
Attitude of mental health professionals towards mental patients depends on the knowledge that they have of their rights ($p=0.001$)	Patients' level of information regarding their rights does not depend on the type of profession and the level of education of mental health professionals ($p=0.925$)
Mental health professionals' awareness on the rights of mental patients depends on their knowledge of these rights ($p=0.000$)	Attitude of mental health professionals towards mentally ill patients does not depend on their workplace ($p=0.456$)
Psychiatrists who have a person with mental disorder in their family have a more positive attitude towards these patients than nurses ($p=0.014$)	Knowledge on the rights of mentally health patients does not depend on mental health professionals' work-experience ($p=0.642$)
	Knowledge on the rights of mental health patients does not depend on the level of education of mental health professionals ($p=0.531$)

DISCUSSION

According to our results, there was a positive correlation between the level of education and the attitude towards the mental health patients; consequently, higher level of education among the mental health professionals was associated with a more positive attitude towards the patients. This finding is consistent with those reported by the majority of the studies in the literature. Yuan, et al. (15) showed that lower education was associated with more negative attitudes towards the mental health patients, while Parra (16) reported that education was the primary variable associated with attitudes towards mental illness. Another study on general attitudes to mental illness found various socio-demographic correlates relating to attitudes including education (17),

though various studies revealed that mental health professionals with higher education have better access to health information, or they have a better understanding of such information as a result of their higher education (18, 19, 20).

Another finding of our study was the positive correlation between the mental health workers knowledge on the rights of mentally ill patients and their attitude towards them. Mårtensson et al. (13) found that mental health care staff had more positive attitudes towards mental illness if their knowledge about mental illness was less stigmatized. The findings of another study conducted in hospitals of Bangalore, India, also revealed a positive correlation between knowledge and attitude of respondents on human rights of mentally ill patients. The correlation between knowledge and attitude at this study indicated that staff nurses with good knowledge on human rights of mental health patients have a favorable attitude towards them (21). In our study we also found that there was a strong correlation between the type of profession (psychiatrist or nurse) and attitude towards mental health patients when there is a patient with mental disorder in the family of a mental health care provider. Psychiatrists who have a mentally ill patient in their family had a more positive attitude towards these patients than nurses. The results of a previous study indicated that among mental healthcare professionals, having family or close friends diagnosed with mental illness (personal contact experience) predicted significantly less social distance towards those with mental illness (22). On the other hand, Mårtensson et al. (13) found that nursing staff contrary to other healthcare professionals had more positive attitudes towards mental illness if they had a friend with mental illness currently or in the past.

Conversely, the findings of our study indicated that there is no association between: the type of profession (psychiatrist or nurse) and the attitude towards the mental health patient; the type of profession and patients' information about their rights; the type of profession and information about patients' rights; patients' awareness about their rights and the level of education of the professionals; the workplace

of mental health care providers and their attitude towards the mental patient; the knowledge on the rights of mental health patients and the level of education of mental health professionals; the work experience in the field of health care of the participants and their knowledge on the status of involuntary hospitalization; the work experience in the field of healthcare of the participants and their knowledge on mental patients' rights. However, a study by Hansson and colleagues suggested that mental health professionals' attitudes towards mental illness might be affected by their work setting characteristics, with staff working within inpatient services having more negative attitudes than those working in out-patient services (12). Further, in contrast to the present study, a study conducted by Sheikhtaheri et al. (23) revealed that more experienced nurses had higher knowledge regarding the patients' rights.

CONCLUSION

Concluding, our study suggests that mental health professionals tend to have more positive attitudes towards mental health patients if they are more educated and better informed regarding the human rights of psychiatric patients. In addition, psychiatrists who have a person with mental disorder in their family have a more positive attitude towards these patients than nurses. Lastly, our study revealed that mental health professionals' awareness on the rights of mental health patients depends on their knowledge of these rights. These results expose the need of continuing education through training programs of mental health professionals referring to mental health patients' rights.

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