



Suicide Among Medical Students Is it a preventable health tragedy?

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Information reply from the National Medical Commission (NMC) has revealed that, 358 suicide deaths among medical students (125), residents (105) and physicians (128) had been reported between 2010 and 2019; additionally, 1,166 students dropped out of medical colleges; there were several appeals for intervention from students and parents. A recent Right to Information reply from the NMC shows that, a total of 64 MBBS students committed suicide from 2018-22, with 153 MBBS and 1117 PG dropouts.

A total of 11 PG students each committed suicide in Karnataka and Maharashtra and 10 PG students' suicide was reported from Gujarat. Regarding undergraduate students, Kerala saw a suicide of 13 students, Tamil Nadu witnessed 8 suicides, 5 suicides in Andhra Pradesh, 5 suicides in Gujarat, 5 suicides in Karnataka, 5 in Rajasthan, and 5 in Mizoram. 3 Resident doctors died due to suicide at AIIMS Delhi.

Delhi came first in the list as a total number of 155 PG medicos left their institutes in capital. Among these, 112 doctors were pursuing their PG courses at Vardhman Mahavir Medical College (VMMC), Apart from VMMC, AIIMS Rishikesh, where 97 doctors left courses.

Of late the increasing number of suicides among medical students has been a major concern, and the issue has been raised by the medical fraternity as well as the National Medical Commission. Indian Medical Association is also working towards helping the residents who are facing mental issues to prevent such suicide cases in the future. Other than medical aspirants, and medical students, students preparing for medical competitive examination is also taking this extreme step, as reflected by the high number of students suicides in Kota, Rajasthan.

A survey of 358 suicide deaths among medical students, residents and physicians between 2010 and 2019 showed around seven out of 10 suicides happened before the age of 30. Academic stress and financial issues were the causes listed as the reasons behind the suicides. As these professionals go on to make up the health care system of the country, the study said this was a public health crisis and called for further research.

A Population at Risk

Many medical students and residents lead a terrible lifestyle. It is one of the most stressful professions of modern times and has become increasingly difficult due to the pandemic. They need work-life balance like the rest of the students. Medical students begin by taking tough exams, but even once they pass the test, the stress in their life continues. Medical training is intense. They have to study and work long hours, often in stressful environments where they must confront death on a regular basis.

Burnout and Depression

Overwhelming job demands and insufficient resources in the medical profession can lead to burnout - a workplace syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a low sense of personal accomplishment from work. Burnout can have far-reaching implications. It can impact job performance, increase turnover, and lead to medical errors and clinician suffering. Students will see people suffer and die with illness. They will see families struggle with the loss or impairment of their loved ones and they will confront the issue of patients who can't afford care. All of those things create enormous stress for people who are in training.

Studies show that students arrive at medical school with the same or better mental health as their peers. But after two years, they tend to suffer significant burnout, stress, and anxiety. As they continue to progress in their training, they are at significant risk for depression. In a 2014 Academic Medicine study of medical residents, 60% met the criteria for burnout, more than half screened positive for depression, and roughly 8% experienced suicidal ideation. A systematic review and meta-analysis with research work published globally show depression prevalence of 37.9% among medical students. Many of these trainees know they're in crisis. But only one third of medical students experiencing burnout or depression seek help - mainly because they're afraid of what it might do to their careers.

Warning signs and risk factors

There are numerous potential warning signs and risk factors for suicide among medical students. Being male, in the final years of medical school, and having psychological comorbidities may increase risk. Academic stress/failure, harassment/bullying and relationship issues may also be

contributors to suicide risk.

Awareness of warning signs such as recent changes in behaviours and leaving a suicide note are important in identifying at-risk students. Medical schools, through better support, revisions of curricula, and data collection, can offer a valuable role in helping to prevent medical student suicide.

What NMC is doing?

NMC had launched an online survey after finding that many medical students had taken their lives in the last five years. In the survey, medical students and faculty submitted details about the mental health illnesses they were suffering from, ranging, crippling anxiety and work pressure to overwhelming stress. Concerned over the number of students suffering from mental illness, the NMC formed a 15-member committee to discuss the issue and draft recommendations. These recommendations will be submitted to the Union Health and Family Welfare Ministry to be rolled out across medical colleges in the country.

Some of the universal recommendations which are in discussion includes-adjustment support and orientation in medical colleges for new students to understand their role & duties; facilities in the college; ways to cope up with home sickness; awareness campaigns, celebration of world mental health day, world suicide prevention day and drug prevention day; anti-ragging measures will be strengthened; regulations of duty hours for medical PG students not more than 80 hours a week which is being followed internationally. Currently, PG students are working as much as 100 hours a week without any break," said a government official requesting anonymity.

Suggestions made by the NMC following the overwhelming response to the online survey include gate-keeper programmes to prevent suicide and for identifying vulnerable students, regulating duty hours for post-grad students, better student facilities, friendlier work environment, and round-the clock professional counselling services.

Addressing concerns

Plans are also in discussion to address concerns of the teachers; strengthening of mentor-mentoring programme. A new initiative—gate-keepers programme—will start to prevent suicide and identify vulnerable students and exclusive 24x7 professionals counselling services will commence to counsel students via government's tele-manas portal.

In a study published from US, by modifying risk factors, the results were striking: the percentage of the Class of 2018 that reported moderate-to-severe symptoms of depression was 4% at the end of their first year and 6% at the end of their second year. In comparison, the percentage of the classes of 2012 and 2013 (which preceded the initiative) that reported these symptoms was 27% at the end of their first year and 31% at the end of their second year.

Academic stress is one of the major reasons for medical students' suicide across the country and specific changes in the system are necessary in this direction. NEXT exam is one positive step in this direction, where a single exit exam will also serve as a licensing exam as well as a gateway to postgraduate courses.

"IMA Helping Hands" is a project of IMA Kerala State in collaboration with Indian Psychiatric Society, Kerala State and Kerala Government Medical Officer's Association started in the year 2023-24 for providing emotional support and to decrease the suicides among doctors and medical students. The aim of this project is to extend emotional support and psychological first aid for doctors and medical students at the time of crisis. Volunteers who are experienced psychiatrists will be available from 8 am to 8 pm to listen to student's problems without any prejudice, without prior appointment and maintaining absolute confidentiality. Service will be absolutely free. "IMA Helping Hands" toll free number is 7065568258

References

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