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MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OF MEDICAL AND NON-MEDICAL STUDENTS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Since the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the educational system, university students facing various challenges, one of which is the challenge of the global recession. Although medical and non-medical students are willing to support pandemic response efforts, how the crisis has affected their mental health remains uncertain.

This study aimed to assess the mental health problems of medical and non-medical students from the Republic of Moldova during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings of this study suggest that medical and non-medical students' mental health is a public health issue that has become even more critical in the context of a pandemic, underlining the need to reinforce prevention, surveillance, and access to care.

Keywords: *mental health, medical students, non-medical students, COVID-19, pandemic.*

PROBLEMELE DE SĂNĂTATE MINTALĂ ALE STUDENȚILOR MEDICINIȘTI ȘI NON MEDICINIȘTI DIN REPUBLICA MOLDOVA ÎN PERIOADA PANDEMIEI COVID-19

Pandemia COVID-19 a afectat sistemul educațional, studenții universitari fiind confruntați cu diverse provocări, una dintre care – necesitatea de a se adapta la provocarea recesiunii globale. Deși studenții medici și non-medici sunt dispuși să susțină eforturile de răspuns la pandemie, modul în care criza le-a afectat sănătatea mintală rămâne incert.

În acest studiu ne-am propus să evaluăm problemele de sănătate mintală ale studenților medici și non-medici din Republica Moldova în timpul pandemiei COVID-19.

Rezultatele acestui studiu sugerează că sănătatea mintală a studenților mediciniști și non-medici este o problemă de sănătate publică care a devenit și mai critică în contextul unei pandemii, subliniind necesitatea de a consolida prevenirea, supravegherea și accesul la îngrijire.

***Cuvinte-cheie*:** *sănătate mintală, studenți medici, studenți non-medici, COVID-19, pandemie.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on the mental health and wellbeing of people around the world [1]. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has created an environment where many determinants of poor mental health are exacerbated. The need for up-to-date information on the mental health impacts of COVID-19 in a way that informs health system responses is imperative [2].

Added to the fear of contracting the virus in a pandemic such as COVID-19 are the significant changes to our daily lives as our movements are restricted in support of efforts to contain and slow down the spread of the virus. Working at home without any possibility of coming to the university campus and not being able to attend lectures and courses face-to-face together with peers, tutors, and teachers requires students to learn and adapt to new behavior rules. Psychologically, pandemics increase uncertainty which causes stress and increases the risk for mental ill health if it conflicts with behavior routines and habits [3, 4], it is important that we look after our mental, as well as our physical, health [5].

This stress may lead to unfavorable effects on the learning and psychological health of students. The long-term mental health impact of COVID-19 may take weeks or months to become fully apparent, and managing this impact requires concerted effort [6].

University students' psychological problems can significantly impair their academic success and health behaviors. Notably, these mental health problems related to the COVID-19 period are not going away soon, and may be heightened and persist over time, thus affecting future careers and personal opportunities. Previous studies have revealed that the psychological problems of students whose routine life were significantly affected during a prior infectious disease epidemic persist to this day [7].

This study **aimed** to assess the mental health problems of medical and non-medical students from the Republic of Moldova during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Materials and Methods

a. ***Participants and procedure***

In this cross-sectional study, a convenience sample was collected using a self-designed anonymous questionnaire. An online survey was conducted over the period from 10 September to 10 October 2022. The final version of the questionnaire was sent to over 190 university students using Google Forms and after selective criteria, a total of 60 university students were selected as eligible (30 medical and 30 non-medical students, aged between 18 and 23 years) from Moldova State University and "Nicolae Testemițanu" State University of

Medicine and Pharmacy of the Republic of Moldova participated in the survey. One the first page of the questionnaire, the introduction to the study was shown, completion of the questionnaire was considered consent to participate in this study.

b. ***The research instruments***

The COVID-19 Stress Scales (CSS) were developed to better understand and assess COVID-19-related distress. The scales were intentionally designed so they could be readily adapted for future pandemics. A stable 5-factor solution was identified, corresponding to scales assessing COVID-related stress symptoms: (1) Danger, (2) fears about economic consequences, (3) xenophobia, (4) contamination, (5) traumatic stress, and (6) checking. The scales performed well on various indices of reliability and validity. The scales offer promise as tools for better understanding the distress associated with COVID-19 and for identifying people in need of mental health services [8]. The students' stress levels were calculated using the CSS a validated 36-item self-report instrument. The instrument employs a Likert-type scale of 0-4.

Results

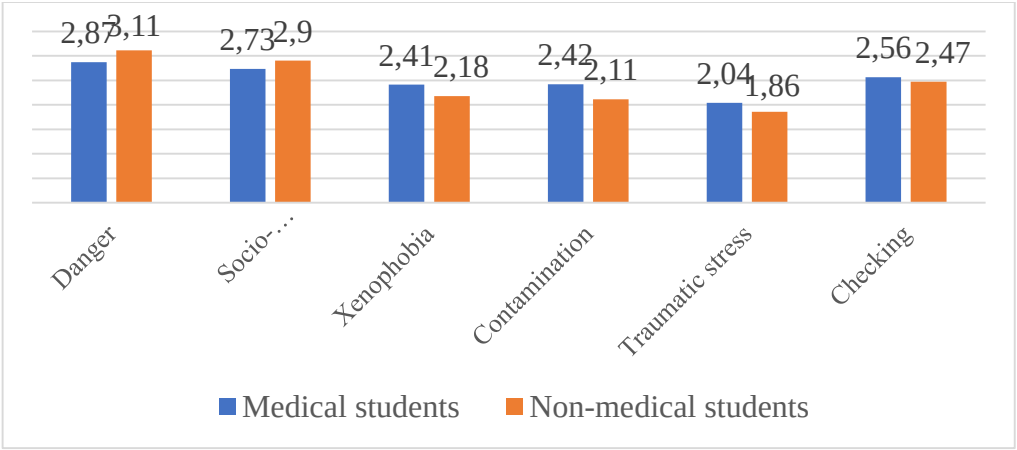


Figure 1. The COVID-19 Stress Scale in research subjects (average values)

Compared with non-medical students, medical students had higher average values reflecting the manifestation of stress caused by COVID-19 (*danger* m=2,87 vs. m=3,11; *socio-economic consequences* m=2,73 vs. m=2,90; *xenophobia* m=2,41 vs. m=2,18; *contamination* m=2,42 vs. m=2,11; *traumatic stress* m=2,04 vs. m=1,86; *checking* m=2,56 vs. m=2,47), (Fig. 1). Such a study assists in gaining insights into the psychological mechanisms of stress during epidemics and constructing an effective psychological support system for different population groups.

Conclusions

In this study, university students in Republic of Moldova reported severe symptoms of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. Protecting the mental health of students is a public health issue that appears even more critical in the context of a pandemic. The results suggest that special attention must be paid to non-medical students. It also appears important to maintain contact with students, to ensure they have good quality housing conditions, to provide for their basic needs, to allow them to maintain physical activity and social ties, and to give them adequate information. Measures promoting access to care should be encouraged.

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