

Exploring the Help Seeking Behaviours of UK Medical Students from Minority Ethnic Background

Rhema Otache¹, Daisy Aje¹, Apeksha Mallya¹, Lucy White², Morejoy Mbang¹, Danielle Aje¹, Miloni Das¹, Jayne Garner¹, Helen West¹

1. University of Liverpool, 2. University College London

Keywords: Medical education, mental wellbeing, medical students, minority ethnic groups, help-seeking behaviours

INTRODUCTION

- Medical students globally have higher levels of mental ill-health than the general population [1][2]
- This may be influenced by the competitive and strenuous environment of medical school [3]. Poor psychological wellbeing can impact performance and empathy [4]
- Students are often dissatisfied by the support on offer [5]
- Those from minoritised ethnic backgrounds often encounter additional challenges in accessing support, but there is little research into how ethnicity intersects with wellbeing or help-seeking behaviours
- This study aims to fill this gap by assessing the mental wellbeing and help-seeking behaviours of medical students in universities across the UK
- It thereby aims to inform more inclusive, accessible support services

METHODS

We conducted a cross-sectional, mixed-methods study. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently and analysed separately, then integrated.

Participants:

- 257 medical students from 20 universities across the UK

Data Collection:

- Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWS)
- Attitudes Towards Seeking Professional Psychological Help Scale (ATSPPH)
- General Help Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ)
- Free text answers to collect qualitative data

Quantitative Analysis:

- Analysis using SPSS and Jamovi, $p < 0.05$
- GHSQ: mean scores for each preferred source of support calculated
- Parametric and non-parametric tests used for normal and non-normal data

Qualitative Analysis:

- Reflective thematic analysis as described by Clarke and Braun [6]
- Inductive and deductive approaches applied, and multiple strategies used to enhance trustworthiness

RESULTS

Quantitative Results:

- SWEMWBS: no statistically significant difference in wellbeing scores between White, Black, and Asian students
- ATSPPH: **Black students had significantly less positive attitudes than White students** to seeking professional psychological help (15 ± 5.33 vs. 20.5 ± 5.06 , $p = 0.002$)
- GHSQ: informal sources of support preferred over formal across all ethnic groups (informal > no help > formal help)

Qualitative Results:

Most students were aware of wellbeing services available, however barriers to access were highlighted:

- Fear of accessing help due to waiting times, scheduling conflicts, and fear of career repercussions
- Reputation of services from peer reports: this could be both a barrier or a facilitator depending on reports from peers
- Service quality, including lack of diversity amongst staff noted by some participants from minoritised ethnic backgrounds:

“non-ethnic staff don’t have the same understanding of what might be very ethnic-specific problems”

DISCUSSION

- First UK-wide study to explore wellbeing & help-seeking behaviours of medical students with focus on ethnic minority groups
- No significant differences in wellbeing scores between ethnic groups:
 - Divergence from patterns in general populations: minoritised ethnic groups show poorer outcomes
 - May reflect shared experience of medical school (stressors + protective factors)
- Preference for informal help-seeking in all groups – consistent with existing literature [7]
 - Black students reported less positive attitudes towards formal help-seeking, mirroring wider UK evidence. Possibly reflective of concern around cultural safety, representation, trust
 - Concerns about staff diversity reinforce literature demonstrating that microaggressions + limited cultural competence can be a deterrent to formal help-seeking [8]
- Persistent barriers to seeking help including negative career repercussions and negative peer testimonials
 - Reinforces prior literature + suggests culture has yet to be shifted

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides insights into the mental wellbeing and help-seeking behaviors of medical students with a particular focus on those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Help-seeking behaviors varied by ethnic group with significant differences observed between Black and White medical students.

Thematic analysis demonstrated a need for medical schools to make wellbeing services more accessible and inclusive, including addressing cultural needs of students.

Findings and recommendations could be relevant not only for medical students but could also inform policy within wider medical institutions.

Further research could build on this study by increasing sample sizes, including in-depth interviews for qualitative analysis and by tracking help-seeking behaviors for students over longer lengths of time.

Recommendations:

1. Culture of “no detriment” via positive peer testimonials and regular student-driven service reviews
2. Offer flexible modes of engagement, accommodating preferences for anonymity / personal connection
3. Embed informal sources of support within formal wellbeing frameworks
4. Encourage diversity within wellbeing teams

REFERENCES

- [1] Jafari N, Loghmani A, Montazeri A. Mental health of Medical Students in Different Levels of Training. *Int J Prev Med.* 2012;3(Suppl 1):S107–12
- [2] Wege N, Muth T, Li J, Angerer P. Mental health among currently enrolled medical students in Germany. *Public Health.* 2016;132:92–100.
- [3] Medisaukaite A, Silkens M, Rich A. A national longitudinal cohort study of factors contributing to UK medical students' mental ill-health symptoms. *Gen Psychiatr.* 2023;36(2):e101004.
- [4] Bhugra D, Molodynski A, Ventriglio A. Well-being and burnout in medical students. *Ind Psychiatry J.* 2021;30(2):193–7.
- [5] Bhugra D, Sauerteig SO, Bland D, Lloyd-Kendall A, Wijesuriya J, Singh G, et al. A descriptive study of mental health and wellbeing of doctors and medical students in the UK. *Int Rev Psychiatry.* 2019;31(7-8):563–8.
- [6] Clarke V, Braun V. Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: A critical reflection. *Counselling and psychotherapy research.* 2018;18(2):107–10.
- [7] Brown J, Evans-Lacko S, Aschan L, Henderson MJ, Hatch SL, Hotopf M. Seeking informal and formal help for mental health problems in the community: a secondary analysis from a psychiatric morbidity survey in South London. *BMC Psychiatry.* 2014;14(1):275.
- [8] Hardy R, West H, Fisher P. Exploring attitudes towards seeking help for mental health problems among university students from racially minoritised backgrounds: a systematic review and thematic synthesis. *BMC Public Health.* 2025;25(1):1428.