

EXPLORING PERSONAL CARE PRACTICES AMONG UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

In the demanding journey of medical education, the necessity for medical students to prioritize personal care is paramount. Despite efforts to integrate wellness initiatives into curricula, challenges persist in understanding and promoting effective self-care practices. This cross-sectional study aimed to explore personal care practices among undergraduate medical students to identify challenges and routine behaviours influencing their holistic growth. A questionnaire-based approach was utilized, involving 120 undergraduate medical students from various stages of medical school. Results highlighted diverse practices and challenges: significant proportions of students reported difficulty pursuing hobbies, experiencing sleep deprivation, frequent consumption of energy drinks, and indulging in junk food. Remarkably, self-awareness regarding mental health's importance was observed among most participants. Discussion delved into the implications of these findings, such as the impact of sleep deprivation on patient care and the potential stress coping mechanisms through unhealthy habits. Comparison with existing literature underscored the urgency of addressing these challenges to safeguard medical students' well-being. Strategies for enhancing self-care awareness and implementation are proposed to support medical students in navigating the rigorous demands of their education while prioritizing personal well-being. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue on medical student wellness and underscores the need for comprehensive approaches to foster a culture of self-care within medical education.

Keywords: Personal Care, Medical, Undergraduates, Self-care, Wellness.

INTRODUCTION

Medical students, driven by a desire to heal and serve society, embark on a demanding journey characterized by intensive academic pursuits, prolonged study hours, and emotionally demanding clinical encounters. Within this challenging milieu, the significance of prioritizing personal well-being assumes a mysterious aura. Recognized as a cornerstone of professional growth, self-care plays a vital role not only in individual development but also in the provision of high-quality patient care. However, the demanding academic workload and immersion in clinical settings can disrupt the delicate balance between work and personal life for medical students¹. The palpable stress experienced by these future caregivers underscores the pressing need for heightened awareness of mental health issues and the adoption of robust self-care practices throughout medical training. Despite the formidable challenges posed by the medical curriculum and demanding schedules, the commitment to self-care remains unwavering, representing an essential investment in the overall well-being of medical professionals. Across diverse global contexts, the prevalence of anxiety among medical students serves as a stark reminder of the profound impact of educational stressors on mental health².

While educational institutions have made efforts to promote personal well-being through various stress management programs, integrating self-care into educational frameworks remains a significant challenge. Through meticulous surveying and analysis, investigating the intricate relationship between stress, self-care, and quality of life offers a pathway to unravelling the complex dynamics at play. By employing a comprehensive understanding of self-care, researchers can delineate precise associations among these variables, paving the way for more tailored interventions tailored to the unique needs of medical students³.

The importance of personal well-being extends beyond individual welfare, shaping the very essence of medical practice. Indeed, the performance and effectiveness of medical professionals during moments of heightened intensity and emergency hinge on their personal care practices. Despite concerted efforts to enhance student wellness through curriculum adjustments, there remains a critical gap in the literature regarding the multifaceted dimensions of personal care and its profound impact on the holistic development of medical students⁴.

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to shed light on the pivotal challenges and everyday routines surrounding personal well-being among medical students. This research seeks to offer valuable insights into these essential elements, aiming to aid in the development of personal care practices that can seamlessly integrate into the daily routines of healthcare professionals, fostering and enriching their individual well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to investigate and gain insights into the personal care practices of undergraduate medical students, a comprehensive cross-sectional study methodology was employed. Initially, a questionnaire comprising a diverse range of realistic questions was meticulously developed. These questions were designed to reflect routine and habitual practices encountered in real-life circumstances and everyday situations. The primary objective of the questionnaire was to ensure ease of comprehension and reliability among respondents, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding and advancement of the research objectives.

The study cohort consisted of 120 undergraduate medical students randomly selected from various phases of their curriculum at Madha Medical College and Research Institute. This selection was conducted during the month of December 2023. The inclusion of participants from different phases of the undergraduate medical program was crucial, considering the potential variability in personal care practices across different stages of medical education due to diverse responsibilities and commitments. To facilitate data collection, the questionnaire was administered to participants via a Google Form link. Participants were invited to complete the questionnaire at their convenience, ensuring a single-time response. Subsequently, the responses were gathered, and the data were entered into Google Sheets for further analysis.

Descriptive statistical analysis of the collected data was performed using SPSS version 23 software, enabling the generation of conclusive results regarding personal care practices among undergraduate medical students. This methodological approach ensured robust data collection and analysis, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the study findings.

RESULTS

The research outcomes unveiled a significant level of engagement among undergraduate participants, with females comprising 64% and males 36% of the sample. Particularly notable was the active involvement of first and second-year students, with a higher proportion of day scholars (42%) compared to hostellers (58%). Upon detailed examination of the responses, it became apparent that there was considerable variability across all queried aspects, necessitating a thorough analysis to grasp the intricate nuances of personal care.

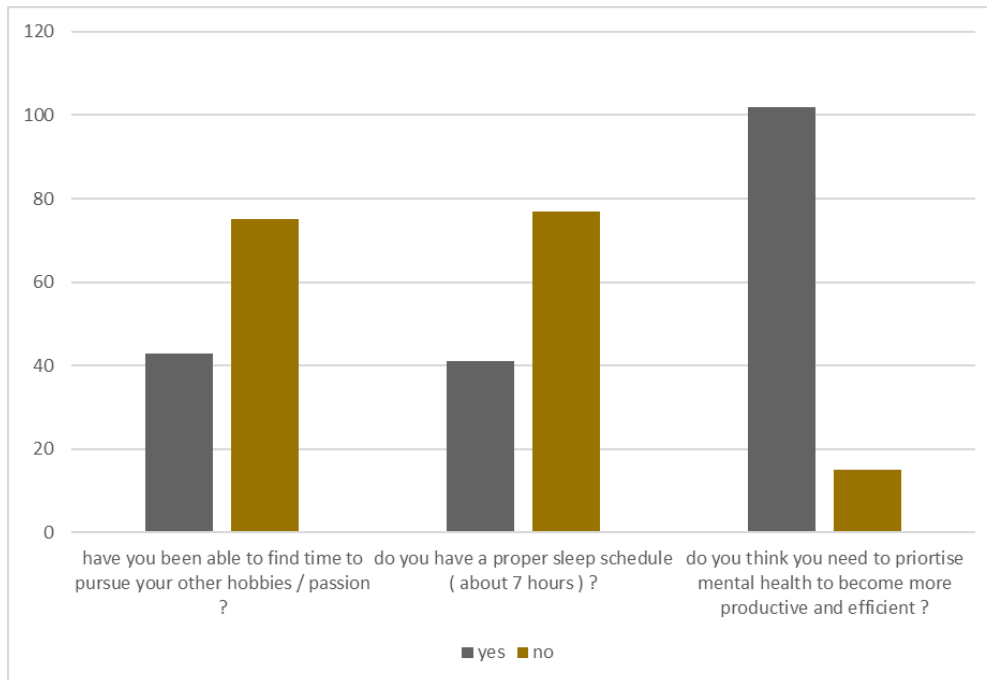


Figure 1: Data Analysis of the Responses from the Undergraduate Medical Students Regarding the Hobbies, Sleep Schedule and Personal Care Priority

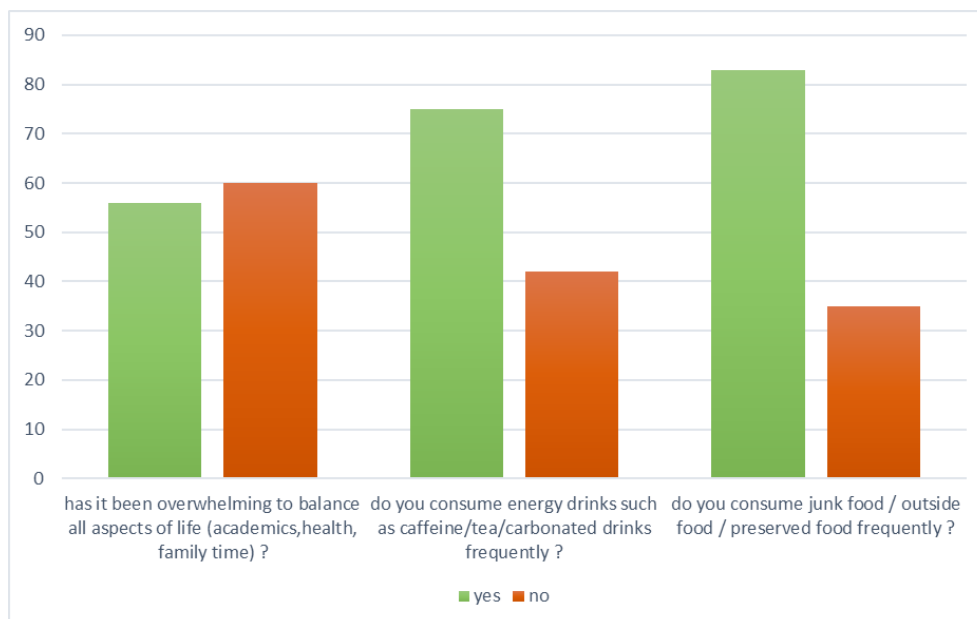


Figure 2: Data Analysis of the Responses from the Undergraduate Medical Students Regarding the Work Life Balance and Healthy Food Habits

As shown in figures 1 and 2, among the 120 surveyed students, 70(58%) expressed challenges in pursuing their hobbies, whereas 50(42%) indicated successful engagement in leisure activities. Similarly, 70(58%) students reported insufficient sleep (less than 7 hours), while 50(42%) claimed to have adequate rest. Remarkably, almost 110(92%) students exhibited awareness of the significance of personal care in enhancing productivity, while only 10 (8%) remained oblivious to its importance. Further scrutiny revealed that 55 (46%) students struggled to strike a balance between various life facets, and a substantial 75(63%) admitted to frequent consumption of energy drinks. In terms of dietary habits, approximately 85(71%) students confessed to regular indulgence in junk food, shedding light on their lifestyle preferences. A positive discovery emerged as nearly 100(83%) students recognized the paramount importance of prioritizing mental health to optimize productivity, underscoring an encouraging trend toward heightened awareness among the student cohort.

DISCUSSION

The outcomes of our study offer valuable insights into essential facets of personal care among undergraduate medical students, closely integrated with the typical challenges encountered by individuals in medical education. The diverse range of responses has added intrigue to the research, prompting a deeper analysis and evolution of our understanding on the importance of personal care. Initially, it's concerning that nearly 70(58%) students have indicated their inability to pursue their hobbies. This distinctive finding demands further exploration in order to understand the subtle variations and delicate differences in accordance with the challenges faced by students, as hobbies serve as vital opportunities for energy renewal and cognitive thinking. Engaging in leisure activities beyond routine, enhances efficiency, concentration, and enthusiasm for other conventional tasks.

Nearly 70(58%) students have reported experiencing sleep deprivation, a highly concerning observation considering that sleep is a fundamental necessity for life and survival. Sleep deprivation can lead to a wide spectrum of challenges, ranging from minor issues like lack of concentration and reduced alertness to more serious consequences such as critical errors in patient healthcare. Given the demanding nature of patient care, which necessitates precision, attentiveness, and swift action, such lapses due to sleep deprivation are undeniably alarming. For example, a Systematic Review, Meta-analysis about the worldwide prevalence of sleep problems among medical students and Meta-regression of 109 Studies Involving 59427 Participants was done by Binjabr MA et al., which highlighted that about 50–60% of the participants had poor sleep, with female students more likely to have it. This rate is higher than that of the general population and other college students⁵. Sleep deprivation among medical students has garnered considerable research attention. Yet, there remains a pressing need to swiftly address its impact and explore diverse time management strategies and methodologies to enhance sleep quality.

Another significant finding from our research is that 75(63%) students have admitted to frequent consumption of energy drinks. These beverages, often containing caffeine and other stimulants, are commonly used for cognitive enhancement and to sustain focus for extended periods without experiencing fatigue. This behaviour indirectly reflects poor sleep quality and suggests inadequate self-care among medical students. It also highlights the deliberate choices made by medical students to compromise their health in order to perform better under pressure. While there has been recent research

on caffeine addiction and consumption levels among medical students, for example, a systematic review of stimulant usage by medical students was done by Plumber N et al., which highlighted on the significant increase in consumption of caffeine by medical students world-wide³. However, topics such as awareness of the adverse effects of high doses of caffeine and other energy drinks among medical students, remain relatively unexplored and require immediate attention.

Another noteworthy revelation from the study is that 85(71%) students admitted to frequently consuming junk food. Poor dietary practices can have profound long-term implications. A pilot study in Tunisia⁶, studied the prevalence and risk factors of functional gastrointestinal disorders in early period medical students, it included a total of 343 students, the prevalence of functional gastrointestinal disorders was found to be 54.2%, the high risk factors associated were abnormal BMI, living in school dormitory, low water intake, digestive medication use and anxiety. The prevalence of unhealthy eating habits among medical students indicates that, despite being conscious of the negative consequences, they still opt for junk food regularly. There has been scant research on the topic of junk food consumption among medical students, and an additional aspect to investigate is whether frequent indulgence in junk food has become a contemporary stress coping mechanism among them.

Despite extensive research assessing personal care levels in medical students, such as the recent study done by Picton A⁷, which provokes our curiosity by its title, "Work-life balance in medical students: self-care in a culture of self-sacrifice." which crucially explained the nuances in challenges faced by medical students. As a different approach, our research also aimed to determine the number of participants who possessed self-awareness regarding the importance of prioritising mental health to enhance productivity because ultimately, self-realisation stands as the pivotal factor for instigating successful changes in individuals.

A study done by Moutinho IL et al. deals with the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and stress in medical students from all semesters of a Brazilian medical school and assess their respective associated factors. The findings revealed increasing levels of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms in medical students, with marked differences among course semesters. Gender appeared to influence the mental health of the medical students⁸. An umbrella review and meta-analysis of meta-analyses was done to study the worldwide prevalence of self-reported psychological and behavioural symptoms in medical students, The evidence shows that fully one-third of medical students experience a range of troublesome psychological and behavioural symptoms, likely attributable to the demanding and intense study environment, the hierarchical structure of medical training facilities, and the vulnerability of the young adulthood time period⁹. This indicates that the increasing levels of stress, depression, and anxiety among medical students necessitate a thorough examination of their causes.

Individuals commonly struggle with the delicate balance required to manage academics, health, and family obligations. In light of these challenges, this study endeavours to delve into the impact of individuals' ability to allocate time for their hobbies and passions on their overall productivity and efficiency. Furthermore, it seeks to unravel the perceived overwhelm associated with juggling these diverse facets of life and its potential ramifications on lifestyle choices and well-being.

Medical students often struggle to find time for hobbies and passions due to the demanding nature of their education. This aligns with previous research highlighting

limited leisure time¹⁰. The rigorous curriculum and multiple responsibilities contribute to this challenge, leading to stress and burnout. However, engaging in hobbies is crucial for promoting work-life balance, mental health, and preventing burnout. Medical schools can support students by implementing initiatives for flexible scheduling and promoting self-care. Prioritizing the holistic development of students is essential for their well-being and success as future healthcare professionals.

Sleep quality emerged as a significant concern among medical students, with many admitting to irregular sleep schedules or not meeting the recommended seven hours of sleep per night. This is particularly alarming given the well-documented link between inadequate sleep and diminished cognitive function, potentially impacting academic performance and overall well-being¹¹. Prioritizing sleep hygiene is crucial for optimizing cognitive function, enhancing academic performance, and promoting overall well-being among medical students. Therefore, interventions aimed at promoting healthy sleep habits and raising awareness about the importance of adequate sleep is critical for supporting the well-being and success of medical trainees¹².

Furthermore, our study underscores the critical importance of prioritizing mental health among medical students. Despite the inherently high-stress environment of medical training, a significant number of students expressed hesitancy or uncertainty regarding the need to prioritize mental health. This finding highlights a potential gap in awareness or access to resources for managing stress and promoting mental well-being within medical education. These results are consistent with previous studies that have also identified challenges in addressing mental health concerns among medical students^{13,14}. Efforts to enhance mental health support and education within medical training programs are essential to address this issue and ensure the well-being and resilience of future healthcare professionals.

Additionally, the study highlighted that medical students frequently find it overwhelming to balance academics, health, and family time. This emphasizes the necessity for robust support systems and strategies to assist students in navigating the challenges of medical training while preserving a healthy work-life balance. These findings align with previous research and emphasize the importance of addressing the multifaceted demands placed on medical students to promote their overall well-being and success^{15,16}.

Moreover, our study findings echo those of previous research, emphasizing the significance of dietary habits among medical students. Many participants reported frequent consumption of energy drinks and junk food, aligning with previous studies. While these dietary choices may be prompted by the demands of their rigorous schedules and the need for quick energy boosts, they may also pose long-term health risks and compromise overall well-being. Addressing these patterns is crucial to promote healthier lifestyles among medical students, consistent with findings from previous studies^{17,18}.

CONCLUSION

In essence, the research highlights the intricate relationship between managing life's complexities, individual lifestyle choices, and their collective impact on well-being and effectiveness. It emphasizes the importance of allocating time for personal passions, maintaining a restful sleep routine, and prioritizing mental health to optimize

productivity and contentment. Integrating these practices into daily routines promotes a more balanced and enriching life, enhancing overall wellness. While temporary solutions like caffeine consumption and fast food may offer momentary relief from stress, they also pose potential long-term health risks. Therefore, addressing the underlying causes of overwhelm and implementing strategies for stress management and healthier habits are crucial for fostering sustainable equilibrium. Further exploration in this domain promises valuable insights into effective interventions for supporting individuals in navigating life's demands while preserving their well-being.

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Conflict of Interest: None declared.

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