

LETTER TO THE EDITOR (SEPTEMBER 10, 2021) CONCERNING THE PAPER “AVAILABILITY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS IN POLAND”

Dear Editor,

We read with great interest the letter titled “Availability of psychological support for medical students in Poland” [1]. As a group of Polish and British medical students at King’s College London, UK, we have noticed several differences between the psychological support offered in the 2 countries. We believe that our experiences of both systems could offer a unique perspective on this topic and facilitate in finding a better solution.

Sadly, we can relate to the difficulties Polish medical students experience throughout their academic degrees. In the UK, 29% of medical students have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, while 82% of them meet the criteria for “disengagement” and 89% for “exhaustion” [2]. Having observed these problems first-hand, we agree that the support should be more widely accessible. Just like in Poland, each British university decides on the level and type of psychological support available. However, despite such decentralisation of the support system, access to the services is easy, free-of-charge and well-advertised through universities’ webpages. The British Medical Association, which encompasses all medical students and professionals in the UK, also provides support both in a form of a 24/7 help line and in-person sessions [3]. Active engagement of Polish medical unions could perhaps aid in setting up, running and popularising such services.

Although we recognise the importance of teachers in supporting students, we believe that the introduction of a pastoral system could prove beneficial. At King’s College London, as part of the pastoral system, we are all assigned a Personal Tutor, Clinical Supervisor and Educational Supervisor, none of whom are responsible in deciding our academic progression. Being in regular contact with them provides us with a safe space for discussing any concerns. Moreover, it facilitates easier signposting to relevant help options, if required [4].

Finally, although we recognise the stigma associated with seeking help by healthcare professionals, more action is needed to challenge the current attitudes towards this issue [5]. Creating nationwide guidelines and introducing regulations protecting those accessing support is crucial. In the UK, the General Medical Council has produced guidelines on supporting students with mental health conditions [4]. Thereby, aiming to protect the rights and health of physicians and students and encouraging more of them to seek help. Additionally, universities should be encouraged to celebrate Mental Health Week, through creating initiatives aiming to promote mental wellbeing among students and eliminate stigma surrounding these issues [5]. Encouraging medical students to look after their own health will only have positive consequences for both staff and patients.

Key words:
psychological support, medical students, mental health,
medical education, stress, support systems

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