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Knowledge and Opinions of Families about Mental Illness and Mental Patients

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ABSTRACT

Sixty families of first admitted psychiatric patients were interviewed to explore their knowledge about mental illness and their opinions about mental patients in general and their hospitalized ill member in particular.

The results showed a tendency of family members to reflect the general community view of mental patients, describing them as unreasonable, odd and bizarre. They also tend to deny psychotic illness among their patients. Their knowledge about mental illness is very limited and greatly influenced by the stigma attached to mental illness.

INTRODUCTION :

Nowadays, trends in psychiatric nursing are directed towards community care. Mental patients are no longer kept in the hospital to the same extent as they used to be. This policy of early discharge is principally based on the families' acceptance of their discharged patients and families' knowledge about mental illness. In fact, families affect the cause and outcome of mental disorders and have a definite important impact on treatment. They are considered the real primary care agents of patients discharged from mental hospitals. Literature showed evidence that knowledge and behaviour of families of formerly hospitalized patients have an effect on the relapse rate (Mechanic, 1977).

Fagin (1970) and Bentz and Edgerton (1971) have presented evidence that if people in a community know about and are accepting mental illness they can be more supportive to the mentally ill. Moreover they would be willing to recognize symptoms of mental illness in themselves and others, and would play an active role in the

rehabilitation of their psychiatric relatives. This is particularly important since patients are by all means primarily members of the family constellation.

Thus it is necessary to attempt systematically to evaluate families opinions about their mentally ill members and their knowledge about mental illness.

Until very recently, mental patients in Egypt were isolated from the community. Hospitals were overcrowded with patients and discharge had often to be done through the police.

Families seem to ignore and avoid any contact with their patients during their hospitalization. This study is an attempt to test how Egyptian families view their mental patients.

What are their konwledge about and their feeling and reactions towards mental illness ?

MATERIAL AND METHOD :

Data was collected through interviewing families of 60 psychiatric patients admitted for the first time. Two family members for each patient were interviewed in their home.

These two members were the emotionally concerned member (who visited the patient more frequently) and the financially responsible one.

A questionnaire interview was developed for this study.

Data was coded, tabulated and presented in a descriptive form. Tests of significance were done. The test of choice was the " z " test for comparison of two proportions.

RESULTS :

I — Families Opinions about Mental Patients.

Responses of informers as to deviant behavior that necessitated hospitalization of mentally ill patients is shown in table 1.

TABLE I

Informers Opinions of the Patients' Behavior that Necessitated Hospitalization.

Patients' Behavior that led to Hospitalization	Informers			
	Concerned(N=80)		Responsible(N=38)	
	No	%	No	%
Excitement	44	73.33	27	71.05
Lack of sleep and food refusal	38	63.33	26	68.41
Bizarre behavior	33	55.00	20	52.63
Suicide	10	16.67	3	7.89
Sexual deviation	4	6.67	3	7.89
Wandering	10	16.67	7	18.42

Excitement appears to be the most common cause of hospitalization as mentioned by 73.33 % of the concerned and 71.05 % of the responsible family members. Insomnia and refusal of food were the next mentioned reasons for hospitalization (63.33% and 68.41 % respectively).

The behavior least mentioned by both concerned and responsible members was sexual deviation. Though slight variation was noticed between responses of concerned and responsible their variation was not statistically significant at the .05 level.

TABLE II

The Informers' view about the Psychiatric Patients

View about Psychiatric Patients	Informers			
	Concerned (60 members)		Responsible (38 members)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Excitement and hurts others	40	66.67	10	26.32
Suicide	11	18.33	13	34.21
Lack of sleep	15	25.00	30	78.95
Bizarre behavior	45	75.00	6	15.78
Sexual deviation	3	5.00	14	36.84
Wandering	2	3.33	35	92.10
Mentally retarded	8	13.33	1	2.63
Very intelligent and thinks a lot	2	3.33	1	2.63
Any of the previous	31	51.67	12	31.58
Do not know	21	35.00	1	2.63

Thty tend to view the psychiatric patient as a person with bizarre and irresponsible behavior and one who is excited and dangerous to others. Results showed that 13. 33 ٪ of the conerned and 31. 58 ٪ of the responsible mentioned mental retardation as representative of a psychiatric patient. Difference between concerned views and responsible views was found to be statistically significant at the 5 ٪ level in relation to bizarre behavior and mental retardation. (z = 2.41 and z = 2. 09 respectively).

TABLE III

Informers View about the Nature of their Patients Illness.

Nature of the Patients' Illness	Informers				Total	
	Concerned (60 members)		Responsible (38 members)			
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Mental illness (Psychosis)	14	23.33	8	21.05	22	22.45
Psychological troubles (Neurosis)	26	43.34	16	42.11	42	42.86
Neurological disturbances	5	8.33	2	5.26	7	7.14
Magical condition	6	10.00	5	13.16	11	11.22
Do not know	9	15.00	7	18.42	16	16.33
Total	60	100	38	100	98	100

Table III shows the informers' view about the nature of their patients illness. It appears that 43.34 ٪ of the concerned and 42. 11 ٪ of the responsible considered that their patients suffer from some psychological troubles while only 23.33 ٪ of the concerned and 21. 05 ٪ of the responsible viewed their patient's illness as psychosis. It is apparent from this table that 15 ٪ of the concerned and 18. 42 ٪ of the responsible viewed the patient condition as mental sickness. No statistical significance was found between the opinions of concerned and responsible.

II — Informers' Knowledge about Mental Illness.

TABLE IV

Informers Opinions About Causes of Mental Illness.

Opinion about Causes of Mental Illness	General		Related to their Own Patient	
	Con. No. %	Resp. No. %	Con. No. %	Resp. No. %
Heredity	66.67	57.84	2.33	0.00
Financial and work problem.	55	60.53	21.66	12.16
Disturbed family relationship.	73.33	84.21	8.33	10,58
Physical reasons				
Magical causes			15,00	10.53
Sudden trauma			33,33	39.47
Addiction	73.33	84.21		
Others				

Table IV shows the informers' knowledge about causes of mental illness in general and those of their own hospitalized relative. Most of the informers 73.33 % of the concerned and 81.38 % of the responsible believed that disturbed family relationship is a direct factor in the causation of mental illness. Figures were much lower when talking about their own patient 8.33 % and 10.53 % respectively. Heredity was mentioned by 66.67 % of the concerned and 57. 84 % of the responsible as a cause of mental illness and only 2. 33 % of the concerned and none of the responsible related this factor to their patients' illness. It also appears from this table that certain causes as magical causes, sudden trauma were mentioned by the informers as causes of mental illness of their own patients and not as general causes of mental illness.

DISCUSSION :

— Families' Views about Mental Patients :

The results of this study show that the picture of mental patients in most individuals is a reflection of the general community view. In fact three quarters of the studied sample claimed that mental illness is associated with violence, excitement, bizarre and odd behavior.

This may be the effect of mass media which always symbolizes mental patients with the previous behavior. It may also be due to the denial in families in relation to minor behavior changes as symptoms of mental illness. This might also be the reason for late admission observed among psychiatric patients. Families tend to accept patients' hospitalization only when their patient behavior becomes intolerable as seen in table I. The same results were obtained by Paine (1977) who found that Mexican families will seek outside help for their alcoholic patient only when the family cannot deal with him and only to protect its dignity. Laine and Lehtinin (1973) found that people do not resort to mental hospital until illness is severe. They concluded that mild disturbances are not at all recognized as psychiatric illness.

This view about psychiatric patients is at the same time the main reason for fear and rejection of mental illness and its manifestations. It is also the cause for mobilization of denial system of the family. This fact is evident in the results of this study. Although families recognized symptoms of mental illness, as those presented by their patients, yet mental illness as such is denied even after patient's admission to a mental hospital. Various reasons are claimed to be the causative factors. These included possessed by spirits, evil eye, psychological, emotional, and neurological problems. These results are congruent with those of Yarrow et al., (1955) who found that wives of psychiatric patients deny their husbands' illness and define it as difficult overlapping situations. Mental illness was a threat to them and led wives to the "normalization" of their husbands ' illness.

This confusion and uncertainty as to the nature of the patient's illness in the present study may be partly due to the treating physician who tries to comfort the family by stating that their patient is not mentally ill.

Knowledge about Causes of Mental Illness : —

An interesting result obtained in this study is that families tend to give different answers regarding the causes of mental illness in general and in relation to their own patients. They tend to rationalize their patients' illness and give concrete reasons rather than relate it to any factor in connection with the family. This may be to

relieve their guilt feelings and their doubts as to their responsibilities for the patient's illness as well as to their own basic sanity (social stigma).

On the other hand, the majority of the families stated that in general psychiatric illness is due to hashish or drug and alcohol addiction. This may be due to the cultural and religious belief that these substances " steal the mind ". People thus cannot differentiate temporary from permanent effect.

Findings of this study are supported by those of Rose (1959) and Leavitt (1975) who found that families tend to deny their knowledge about causes of psychiatric illness or relate it to uncontrollable variables such as too much travel, war and physical causes.

A positive finding of this study is that about three quarters of the families considered psychiatric illness to be related to disturbed family child relationships. This may be an important clue to consider and take advantage of in the prevention of mental illness and its early detection.

The results of this study reveal the families need for understanding the nature of psychiatric disturbances. As it is also noticed from the previous results that families stated that they got the information related to mental illness from their friends, relatives, T.V., and radio. The role the professional personnel and mass media can play in this respect cannot be ignored and one cannot overlook the importance of mass media in public education. Halpert (1965) indicated that mass media influence people's opinions and that families need to know when, where and how to seek help, Of more and direct importance comes the nurse's role in teaching the patient's families what she believes they need to know in order to render them more knowledgeable and hence more accepting and helpful to their mental patients.

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الموجـــــز

آراء العائلات ومعرفتهم بالمرض العقلى والمرضى العقليين

تمت فى هذه الدراسة مقابلة ستين عائلة لمرضى نفسيين تم دخولهم المستشفى للمـــرة الاولى ، وذلك لاستكشـــاف معرفتهم بالمرض العقـــلى وآرائهم فى المرضى العقليين بشكل عام وفى مرضاهم المحجوزين بالمستشفى بوجـــه خـــاص .

وأوضحت النتائج ميل أفراد العائلة لأن يعبروا عن وجهة نظر المجتمع العامة فى المرضى العقليين ، واصفين اياهم بأنهم غير معقولين ، شـــاذين وغرباء ، كما انهم يميلون الى انكار وجود مرض ذهانى فى مرضاهم ، كما أوضحت الدراسة أن معرفتهم بالمرض العقـــلى محدودة للغاية ، وتتأثـــر بشدة بوصمة العار التى تلحق بالمرض العقلى .

ABSTRAIT

Connaissance et opinions des Familles au Sujet de la Maladie Mentale et des Malades Mentaux.

Soixante familles de malades psychiatriques, internés pour la première fois, ont été interviewés pour explorer leurs connaissances au sujet de la maladie mentale et leurs opinions au sujet des malades mentaux en générale, et de leur proche malade, hospitalisé, en particulier.

Les résultats ont montré une tendance des membres de la famille, à refléter l'avis générale de la communauté au sujet des malades mentaux, les qualifiants de déraisonnables, drôles et bizarres. Ils tendent aussi à nier la maladie psychotique parmi leur malades. Leur connaissance au sujet de la maladie mentale est trés limitée et trop influencée par les stigmates attachés à la maladie mentale.