

• Research Article

Medicine prescription practices of homeopathic undergraduate students in West Bengal, India

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OBJECTIVE: To our knowledge, prescription of homeopathic medicines by homeopathic undergraduate students has not been studied before though it may possess serious implications. We aimed to determine the practice and attitudes of prescription by homeopathic undergraduate students.

METHODS: A cross-sectional study was carried out involving all the students from four government homeopathic schools of West Bengal, India. Ethical requirements were ensured and data were collected using self-administered questionnaires. Chi-square tests and logistic univariate regression analyses were performed to identify associations and differences.

RESULTS: A total of 328 forms were completed. Of these, 264 (80.5%) homeopathic undergraduate students admitted of prescribing medicines independently and most (40.5%) said that they did this 2-3 times a year. The most common reasons for this were 'urgency of the problem' (35.2%), 'previous experience with same kind of illness' (31.8%), and 'the problem too trivial to go to a doctor' (25.8%). About 63.4% of the students thought that it was alright to independently diagnose an illness while 51.2% thought that it was alright for them to prescribe medicines to others. Common conditions encountered were fever, indigestion, and injury. Students who prescribed medicines were more likely to belong to Calcutta Homeopathic Medical College and Hospital (odds ratio = 5.8; 95% confidence interval 2.247-14.972). Prescription by students gradually increased with academic years of homeopathic schools. Many students thought it was alright for students to diagnose and treat illnesses.

CONCLUSION: Prescription of medicines by homeopathic undergraduate students is quite rampant and corrective measures are warranted.

KEYWORDS: homeopathy; education, medical, undergraduate; India; prescriptions, drug; practice, institutional; drug use, irrational

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1 Introduction

Irrational drug use is a common occurrence in health care facilities worldwide and a growing concern across the globe^[1]. The costs of such inappropriate drug use are high in terms of both wasting scarce medical resources and inducing adverse clinical consequences^[1]. Prescribing is a complex skill that depends on a sound knowledge of medicines, principles of dosage, the ability to make judgements concerning risks and benefits, and ideally experience. It is not surprising that occurred errors would incur severe consequences including adverse drug reactions (ADRs), drug resistance, protracted illness, serious health and economic consequences, failure of therapy, inappropriate patient demand, reduced access and attendance rates in schools and workplaces due to drug stock-outs, loss of patient compliance and acceptance, and even death^[1,2]. Besides, medical students, particularly in the developing world, start prescribing medicines before they graduate from medical schools^[3]. Most serious hospital medication errors concern dose, and around 90% involve junior doctors who have recently graduated from medical schools, making them an important potential target of intervention to improve patients' safety^[4]. These observations, however, are very rarely reported^[3]. It has been studied that even senior medical students are not apt enough to prescribing medicines, they are hesitant and their choice of medicine is inappropriate most of the time^[5,6].

Improper use of homeopathic medicines may also lead to unfavourable consequences; however, the research evidence remains miniscule to substantiate the claim. Varied bulk of empirical literature^[7] concerning the subject matter is ambiguous, inconclusive, and has rarely been subjected and verified through high-quality trials. Although ADRs are not usually expected from homeopathic drugs in high dilutions, but it is difficult to draw definite conclusions due to low methodological quality of reports claiming possible adverse effects of homeopathic drugs^[8].

We therefore deemed it is necessary to explore this issue in order for it to be addressed. We were of the opinion that many homeopathic undergraduate students prescribe medicines and we thought it is necessary to find out exactly what proportions of them do this, why they do it and what their attitude is towards this. The objective of our study was to determine the attitude and practices of prescription by homeopathic students.

2 Materials and methods

2.1 Setting and design

A cross-sectional survey was carried out during August-

September, 2013 in the four government homeopathic medical colleges of West Bengal, India, namely Mahesh Bhattacharyya Homeopathic Medical College and Hospital (MBHMC&H), D N De Homeopathic Medical College and Hospital (DNDHMC&H), Midnapore Homeopathic Medical College and Hospital (MHMC&H), and Calcutta Homeopathic Medical College and Hospital (CHMC&H). Permission was taken from the institutional ethics committees of the respective institutions prior conduct of the study.

2.2 Participants

Out of total 902 students enrolled in the ($4\frac{1}{2}+1$) years bachelor in Homeopathic Medicine and Surgery courses running in the four colleges under approval of West Bengal University of Health Sciences, Government of West Bengal and under affiliation to Central Council of Homeopathy, Government of India, 511 (56.7%) participated and answered the questionnaire. For analytical purposes, students were divided into five academic years. Internees were exempted from this survey as they were allowed for institutional prescriptions in the out-patient clinics and in-patient departments by providing provisional registration from the Council of Homeopathic Medicine, Government of West Bengal.

2.3 Sample size

Considering margin of error as 5%, confidence level 95%, response distribution unknown, taken as 50%, and population size of 902 (enrolled number of students in the undergraduate courses in the four government homeopathic schools in West Bengal), target sample size became 270. However, as we obtained 511 responses, out of which 328 were complete and analyzable, the confidence level was increased to almost 97.5%, calculated at <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>; accessed July 16, 2013.

2.4 Questionnaire and data analysis plan

No universally accepted standardized questionnaire was available to evaluate homeopathic undergraduate students' perception towards research. We modified and used a self-administered questionnaire developed in an earlier study by Zafar *et al*^[3] on medical undergraduate students. The directions to fill up the questionnaire were explained verbally to all the students in detail by the research assistants.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first open section sought information regarding students' institutions, academic standings, age, gender, residence, monthly family income, and religion. The second section comprised of ten close-ended questions focusing on students' practice and attitude towards prescription.

To evaluate the feasibility of application of the questionnaire in a large population, a pilot testing was done on 20 students involving five from each institution before conducting the study. It took only five minutes to complete and all the

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