



Epilepsy: What do health-care professionals in Riyadh know?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 June 2013

Accepted 13 July 2013

Keywords:

Epilepsy
Awareness
Health-care practitioner attitudes
Perceptions of epilepsy
Education
Health

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The objective of this study was to report on the knowledge of epilepsy, as well as attitudes and practices toward individuals with epilepsy, among health-care professionals in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia.

Methods: A survey consisting of 23 questions pertaining to epilepsy awareness was distributed to health education workers (n = 51), nutritionists (n = 56), physicians (n = 265), dentists (n = 58), pharmacists (n = 41), nurses (n = 224), physiotherapists (n = 65), and fifth-year medical students (n = 62) in three tertiary hospitals in Riyadh.

Results: Of the 822 respondents who completed the questionnaire, 100% had heard about epilepsy, and 92.6% would allow their children to interact with an individual who has epilepsy. However, 67% of respondents would not want their children to marry an individual with epilepsy, 97.9% of respondents believed that individuals with epilepsy should have the same employment opportunities as the general population, 10.5% believe that supernatural power is the cause of epilepsy, 67.2% did not know how to deal with an individual experiencing an epileptic episode, and 56% did not know that surgery was a treatment option for individuals with epilepsy in Saudi Arabia. Of the 822 respondents, 39% would not abide by a physician's advice not to operate a motor vehicle because of their illness, 91% of whom cited problems with the public transportation system as a reason for disregarding the doctor's advice. When asked if the participants had access to any information on how to deal with epilepsy during their professional training, 60.3% had access to such information during their graduate studies. Ninety-eight percent of those with access to this information were physicians and health-care educators (p < 0.001). Physicians and health-care educators were significantly more aware of epilepsy than any of the other groups.

Conclusion: The level of epilepsy awareness among health-care professionals in Riyadh needs improvement.

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1. Introduction

The prevalence of epilepsy is 6.54 per 1000 population in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia [1], and the incidence of epilepsy is substantially greater in developing countries compared with developed countries [2]. Individuals with epilepsy experience socioeconomic problems that affect quality of life more than the condition itself [3,4]. False beliefs about epilepsy affect the social acceptance of individuals with the condition [5]. Studies investigating public awareness and attitudes toward epilepsy have been conducted in several countries including the United States (USA) [6], China [7], Austria [8], Italy [9], Turkey [10], Greece [11], New Zealand [12], Kuwait [13], and the United Arab Emirates [14]. A recent study conducted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia [15]

found that the level of epilepsy awareness in the Saudi population needs improvement. The study revealed that 21.3% of respondents were not aware of any cause of epilepsy, 50.6% would not seek medical advice if one of their relatives had epilepsy, and 31.4% did not know how to deal with an individual experiencing an epileptic episode [15]. Another study from Saudi Arabia involving university-educated school teachers and undergraduate students [16] reported that 'Jinn', which are unseen creatures believed to exist in all major religions and have the power to possess humans and cause them harm, are still believed to be a cause of epilepsy in Saudi society.

Health-care professionals' knowledge about epilepsy will affect their communication with individuals with the disorder and, in turn, affect the public perception of individuals with the condition. Physicians, nurses, and nonmedical health-care professionals in developing countries play the primary role in delivering medical care for individuals with epilepsy [16,17]. Several reports have demonstrated a lack of awareness regarding epilepsy among health-care professionals [16,18–20]. For example, in Brazil, a recent study involving health-care professionals found that their knowledge about epilepsy needs improvement. This lack of knowledge in some professional health-care

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workers could be due to gaps in information provided during graduate studies [20].

The poor knowledge base regarding epilepsy among some health-care professionals has been suggested to be a causal factor for the epilepsy treatment gap [21]; furthermore, epilepsy knowledge among health-care workers has rarely been evaluated in the literature. The objective of the present study, therefore, was to report on epilepsy knowledge, as well as attitudes and practices toward individuals with epilepsy, among health-care professionals in Riyadh.

2. Methods

2.1. Respondents

Ethics approval for the present study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at King Fahad Medical City (Ministry of Health, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). A standardized questionnaire was distributed to health education workers ($n = 51$), nutritionists ($n = 56$), physicians ($n = 265$), dentists ($n = 58$), pharmacists ($n = 41$), nurses ($n = 224$), physiotherapists ($n = 65$), and fifth-year undergraduate medical students ($n = 62$) in three tertiary hospitals in Riyadh.

2.2. Survey setting and questionnaire

Riyadh is the capital city of Saudi Arabia and is home to 5.8 million residents, comprising 24.1% of the country's population [22]. The present study was conducted during a two-month period in 2012 to identify the educational needs of professional health-care providers with regard to epilepsy.

The standardized questionnaire consisted of 23 questions that have been used in several studies from the USA [6], China [7], Austria [8], Italy [9], Turkey [10], Greece [11], New Zealand [12], and the United Arab Emirates [14]. The questions pertain to epilepsy awareness and knowledge, the attitude and practices toward individuals with epilepsy, and motor vehicle operation (i.e., driving) for individuals with epilepsy. The questions were pilot-tested for comprehension and readability among 80 subjects who were not included in the study. The study team supervised the survey, ensuring confidentiality of the respondents' answers, and made the respondents feel relaxed in answering the questions. English is the official language of the health-care system in Saudi Arabia and the primary language of the education system; therefore, it was the language in which the survey was conducted.

2.3. Data analysis

For statistical analysis, SPSS version 17 (IBM Corporation, USA) was used; a p -value < 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant. A χ^2 test was used to evaluate the association between interview responses and the profession of respondents.

3. Results

Of the 1000 questionnaires distributed, 822 were completed, yielding a response rate of 82%. The demographic variables of the population surveyed are presented in Table 1.

Table 2 shows the percentage of responses to questions regarding familiarity with and understanding of epilepsy. Although 92.6% of respondents would approve of their children interacting with individuals with epilepsy, 67% would object to their children marrying an individual with the disorder. When asked if individuals with epilepsy should have the same employment opportunities as other people, 97.9% respondents believed that individuals with the disorder should have the same employment opportunities as the general population.

Analysis using χ^2 tests showed that physicians and health-care educators were significantly more aware of epilepsy than any of the other groups ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1
Demographics of study sample ($n = 822$).

Demographic variable	Distribution	Percentage (%)
Age (year)	15–30	30.9
	30–45	50.8
	45–60	17.1
	>60	1.2
Gender	Male	47.3
	Female	52.7
Profession	Health-care educator	6.2
	Nutritionist	6.8
	Physician	32.2
	Dentist	7.1
	Pharmacist	5
	Nurse	27.3
	Physiotherapist	7.9
	Fifth-year medical student	7.5

When asked whether they had access to information regarding how to deal with epilepsy during their professional training, the majority (60.3%) of participants reported that they had access to such information during their graduate studies. Ninety-eight per cent of those with access to this information were physicians and health-care educators ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3 summarizes the answers for questions regarding knowledge about epilepsy. Particularly noteworthy was the response regarding the cause of epilepsy, with 10.5% believing that a supernatural power is a cause of epilepsy.

Table 4 summarizes the attitudes of respondents with regard to driving while suffering from epilepsy. A relatively high proportion (39%) indicated that they would not abide by a physician's advice not to operate a motor vehicle because of their illness. The vast majority (91%) cited deficiencies in the public transportation system as a reason for disregarding the doctor's advice, with more than one-third of respondents (35.5%) being unaware of why epilepsy would preclude anyone from driving a motor vehicle.

4. Discussion

The research questionnaire investigating health-care professionals' knowledge of epilepsy in the present study was similar to one that examined the general population's knowledge of this disorder in the same city (i.e., Riyadh) [15], which used a much larger sample size ($n = 7078$) than the 822 respondents who completed the questionnaire in the present study but was comprised of a significantly more diverse group of individuals.

Attitudes toward and knowledge of epilepsy have been addressed by several studies worldwide over the past two decades. An Australian study involving 107 general practitioners (GPs) in Sydney found an improvement in the attitude of GPs toward people with epilepsy as a consequence of a decade of educational promotion regarding the disorder. The majority of GPs were comfortable in referring patients with epilepsy to a neurologist for the initial management of the disorder but were dissatisfied with other health-care therapists because of impractical advice and a perceived lack of empathy [23]. Two studies from the United Kingdom, which were conducted in 1998 and 2005, respectively, examined the attitudes of GPs to the care of individuals with epilepsy [24,25]. The initial study, involving 182 questionnaire respondents, identified the lack of guidelines for epilepsy, which hindered best practices in the care of persons with epilepsy [24]. The second study, involving 115 respondents, reported that the attitudes of GPs to people with epilepsy were significantly associated with quality of care, with specific attitudes of GPs to the care of people with the disorder being clustered within general practices [25]. The importance of continued education regarding epilepsy for GPs and other health-care professionals is well recognized [26], and some of the responses given in the current

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