
Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i ymchwiliad y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg i gymorth iechyd meddwl mewn addysg uwch

This response was submitted to the Children, Young People and Education Committee inquiry into Mental Health support in Higher Education

MHHE 24

Ymateb gan: BMA Cymru Wales
Response from: BMA Cymru Wales

INTRODUCTION

BMA Cymru Wales is pleased to provide a response to the inquiry by the Children, Young People and Education Committee on mental health support in higher education.

The BMA is a professional association and trade union representing and negotiating on behalf of all doctors and medical students in the UK. It is a leading voice advocating for outstanding health care and a healthy population. It is an association providing members with excellent individual services and support throughout their lives.

RESPONSE

Affecting around one in four people, we know that mental health problems are the single largest source of burden of disease in the UK¹. Whilst awareness of mental health may have improved in recent years, there remains a stigma both in wider society and

¹ BMA (2019) 'Mental health', <https://www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/policy-and-research/public-andpopulation-health/mental-health>

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within the medical profession, which can leave medical students reluctant to disclose mental illness or seek help^{2,3}.

This is clearly set out in 'Starting the Conversation: UCAS report on student mental health' which found that despite a welcome 450% increase in student mental health declarations over the last decade, medicine and dentistry courses have the lowest declaration rates with only 1.4% of accepted applicants sharing an existing mental health condition. The report suggests that these low declaration rates are, in part, attributable to fears that sharing this information will have implications for their fitness to practise requirements⁴.

This response will draw heavily from a 2020 Welsh Medical Student Committee (WMSC) report on its mental health survey of medical students in Wales⁵. The survey sought to better understand students' needs regarding mental health support, gauge whether the support services at Cardiff and Swansea medical schools are meeting these needs, and pool students' ideas on how these support services could be improved.

Since undertaking this survey, many of the issues highlighted have been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted the experiences of medical students in Wales, from increased financial pressures to disruptions to their education. This response will therefore provide additional commentary on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of medical students in Wales.

Extent of Need

The WMSC survey found that 70% of respondents have faced mental health issues whilst at university, and that more than one fifth of respondents did not consider themselves to have good mental health.

Some respondents reported that they had experienced mental health issues before attending university, whilst others told us that they felt their stress was a result of workload and exam pressures, or relationships with their student peers.

The survey found that the most common types of mental health issues experienced by respondents were anxiety and/or stress, and depression with many students indicating that they had experienced both. There was considerable variability in the severity of symptoms reported; some students told us they had felt suicidal and/or had self-

² GMC (2015) 'Supporting medical students with mental health conditions', https://www.gmc-uk.org/-/media/documents/Supporting_students_with_mental_health_conditions_0816.pdf_53047904.pdf

³ Munn, F (2017) 'Medical students and suicide'. British Medical Journal.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/sbmj.j1460>

⁴ UCAS (2021) 'Starting the Conversation: UCAS report on student mental health', <https://www.ucas.com/file/513961/download?token=wAaKRniC>

⁵ BMA (2020) 'WMSC mental health survey report', <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2043/bma-mental-health-report-medical-schools-wales.pdf>

harmed, others referred to panic attacks and episodes of severe depression and self-neglect.

A recurring theme was self-doubt regarding ability or suitability to become a doctor, with several students telling us that concern about their future career prospects caused anxiety.

We can also consider more recent experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, during which students have suffered detriment due to disrupted training, causing a reduction in learning opportunities and gaining vital experience. For many medical students exams were suspended or cancelled just days before they were due to take place, compounding feelings of anxiety and uncertainty⁶.

Furthermore, in April 2021, nearly one in three (27%) of respondents to our UK COVID tracker survey that were in training said they had not been able to gain enough experience in urgent and unscheduled care to fulfil the competencies required for their expected stage of training⁷.

With identified need already evident, demonstrated by the 2020 WMSC report, it's clear that the additional difficulties of studying during the pandemic have exacerbated many of the challenges faced by medical students in Wales.

Identification and Provision

The WMSC survey found that 58% of respondents who experienced mental health issues at university received support from their university, with the majority of these utilising the university counselling services available, including the Medic Support service at Cardiff University.

Of those experiencing poor mental health, 23% chose not to seek any support. Of these, over two thirds didn't feel that their mental health issue was of a sufficient magnitude to seek support. Other reasons cited included fear that seeking help would take too much time away from their studies, some were worried it would affect career progression, and others said they feared stigma associated with disclosing their poor mental health.

Crucially, almost 1 in 4 respondents who received mental health support from their university reported that the service did not respond in a 'timely and effective' manner. Further concerns were expressed about access to support while on placements, with 42% of respondents saying they didn't have adequate support. The report suggests that being on placement introduces new challenges to students' mental health, often at a time when students most need support. Yet, accessibility of support depends greatly on

⁶ BMA (2022) 'The impact of covid on the medical profession', <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/5645/bma-covid-review-2nd-report-19-may-2022.pdf>

⁷ BMA COVID Tracker survey, 19 April 2021.

the location of students' placements and the ability for students to have a say in where they are placed.

Medical students have also raised the role of their personal tutors in supporting their mental health. Three in five survey respondents said they did not find it easy to discuss personal problems with their personal tutor, primarily citing very limited or non-existent contact with them.

Welsh Government policy, legislation and funding

Financial pressures play a significant part in the mental health of wellbeing of medical students. A 2022 BMA student finance survey highlighted a number of the challenges currently faced by students across the UK⁸, including:

- 44.3% of students reported being likely to run out of money before the end of the academic year
- 61.8% of students reported having to cut down on essentials (food, heating, clothing) and almost 1 in 25 students reported accessing food banks
- Of those students eligible for NHS bursary, respondents reported that on average the NHS bursary covered just 30% of their expenditures
- 28.5% of students received no reimbursement for travel expenses to placement. England, Wales and Scotland are equally affected by this shortfall.

Clearly, the distress caused by financial insecurity and being unable to afford living costs cannot be understated and contributes significantly to the mental wellbeing of medical students.

These findings are also in the context of the financial uncertainty experienced during the pandemic. The BMA published 'Implications of Covid-19 on medical student finances' which sets out how medical students often find themselves in a complex financial position - stuck between studentship, volunteering in the NHS or paid work within or outside of the NHS. Some students faced and continue to suffer from financial hardship for various reasons including job losses, having to decline paid work in order to volunteer in the NHS or if they need to self-isolate, and financial losses from cancelled electives and other costs that cannot be recuperated⁹.

With these pressures in mind, we've repeatedly called on the Welsh Government to review the funding arrangements for medical students, in particular the NHS bursary, to take account of the unique situation of medical and dental students, not least that of those who study in Wales through graduate entry programmes.

⁸ BMA (2022) 'Student finance survey', <https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/medical-students-across-the-uk-are-feeling-the-financial-heat>

⁹ BMA (2020) 'Implications of Covid-19 on medical student finances', <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2902/2020-msc-covid-19-finance-positions-final.pdf>

Recommendations for change

The WMSC report made a number of recommendations that we believe should be advanced as a priority. Whilst some progress has been made in some areas, we recommend that:

1. Medical schools should be aware of the BMA mental wellbeing charter¹⁰ and sign up to the standards which are relevant to medical students. Where medical schools have already signed up, the charter should be actively promoted and utilised alongside the BMA Medical student wellbeing checklist¹¹.
2. Improve signposting and promotion of all mental health support services available to medical students, including university specific services, BMA wellbeing support services, online/app support, NHS services.
3. Include mental health workshops as part of induction weeks. Workshops should educate students on preventative measures and especially emphasise the fact that no issue is of insufficient magnitude to seek help.
4. University mental health services should offer specialised support tailored to medical students' specific needs. This should include university support services opening hours being adapted to accommodate medical students' schedules. If necessary, services should offer extended hours for medical students.
5. Actively reduce the stigma attached to experiencing mental health issues as a medical student through a range of measures informed by consultation with students and recent graduates.
6. Appoint personal tutors, in addition to academic tutors, who mentor students on personal rather than academic issues. These personal tutors should undertake mental health first aid training and must make themselves available to meet with their students at least once a month.
7. Ensure that medical students are included in established peer mentor schemes.
8. Seek to improve mental health support for medical students on placement by implementing buddy schemes at placement hubs.

We also endorse the recommendation in 'Starting the Conversation: UCAS report on student mental health' for targeted action in subject areas with low declaration rates to reassure students that sharing a mental health condition will not affect their chances of receiving an offer. The report suggests that particular emphasis should be given to medicine and dentistry courses so students feel confident that sharing this information will not have implications for their fitness to practise requirements.

Alongside these crucial changes, and given the impact that financial insecurity and uncertainty can have on the mental health of medical students, we would also recommend a review of current funding structures for medical students, including the

¹⁰ BMA (2019) 'BMA mental wellbeing charter', <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/4363/bma-mental-wellbeing-charter-oct-2019.pdf>

¹¹ BMA (2022) 'Medical student wellbeing checklist', <https://www.bma.org.uk/media/6046/med-students-wellbeing-checklist.pdf>

NHS bursary, to ensure that students receive appropriate levels of financial support throughout their education and training.