

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Attrition in Medical College: Experience at Ziauddin Medical University in Pakistan

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Introduction

Attrition of medical students' is a cause of concern and significant challenge to medical schools. Despite high admission standards, withdrawal of students is mostly due to academic reasons, followed by financial and occasionally personal reasons. Although a few schools have adopted alternative admission procedures, reliance only on excellent academic achievement is still prominent (Neame *et al.*, 1992). Most studies report financial loss and the emotional trauma faced by students and their families as leading results of attrition (Simpson & Budd, 1996; Powis *et al.*, 1988).

In 1996 Ziauddin Medical University (ZMU) admitted its first cohort of 56 students with the aim of preparing them to be family physicians and self-directed learners. Entry was possible only after meeting the criteria of academic excellence, an entry test and interviews with an emphasis on non-cognitive behaviours. Like other medical schools, ZMU has also experienced the problem of student withdrawal.

Methods

A review of the records of 64 students who failed to complete the course at Ziauddin Medical University between 1996 and 2001 was undertaken.

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Demographic information, previous school entrance examination scores and remarks of the admission interviewers were noted. Information from tutors' guidance sessions with the individual students and their families was also noted. School leaving year was recorded. Reasons for leaving were grouped into academic withdrawal, health problems and personal.

Results

During the six years between 1996 and 2001, 64 students had academic difficulty, representing 16% of the total intake of 396 students during that period. The University admitted 126 male students and 240 female students between 1996 and 2001 (Table 1). Demographic and examination scores were organized to find out the reasons for attrition. Twenty-nine males and 35 females left the course between these years. There was no significant sex difference among the leavers. All leavers had taken HSC (Higher Secondary Examination) Pakistani system in their twelfth year of schooling. More of the students had A grade (56.2%), and the rest of the students who left the course had B grade (43.7%). The overall performance in HSC Examination is shown in Table 1.

A total of 6 (17.1%) female and 7 (24.1%) male students voluntarily left the course, and 29 (82.9%) female and 22 (75.9%) male students withdrew from the course for academic reasons (Table 1). Twenty-seven (93.1%) female and 19 (86.4%) male students were asked to withdraw due to poor academic performance. Five (7.8%) students left medicine due to psychiatric or psychological problems. A similar number of students left after being admitted into some other institution. Four (6.3%) students left

Table 1. Number and gender of students with grades, reasons for leaving the medical course during 1996–2001

	Female (%)	Male (%)
No. of Students (%)	240 (60.6)	126 (31.8)
Leavers (%)	35(8.83)	29 (7.32)
Grades (High School leaving examination)		
A	20 (36.62)	16 (56.25)
B	15 (63.38)	13 (43.75)
Withdrawal (academic)	29 (82.9)	22 (75.9)
Poor performance	27 (93.1)	19 (86.4)
Psychological	2 (6.8)	3 (13.6)
Voluntarily (personal)	6 (17.1)	7 (24.1)
Financial	2 (33.3)	2 (28.6)
Transfer to other college	1 (16.7)	4 (57.1)
Migrated overseas	3 (50)	1 (14.3)

medicine for financial reasons, and a similar number migrated overseas (Table 1).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study has limitations that need to be considered. Firstly it was limited to a new private medical school which offers an innovative curriculum unlike other medical schools. Secondly admission policy consideration was not academic success alone, but also assessed qualities regarded as important in doctors to match the diverse needs of society.

Institutions that offer innovative curricula expect students to be independent learners and develop higher intellectual skills. Many times even high achievers have difficulty primarily due to their previous traditional schooling. Admission criteria for such schools has moved from academic achievement to include an entrance test, referee letters, and interviews.

There is significant evidence that students with proven academic ability may be failing to complete the course due to personal reasons, social problems or illnesses (Neame *et al.*, 1992; Powis *et al.*, 1988). Lack of intrinsic motivation may be one of the other reasons for failure, particularly in cases where choice of career may have been influenced by family decisions. In Pakistan particularly, female student withdrawal is also influenced by socio-economic or cultural factors such as early marriage, elders' decision to discontinue studies or financial hardship within families. These circumstances tend to change their career path and in some cases force them to discontinue studies. However, in this study there is no significant difference between the attrition rate of male and female students.

Medical education is stressful. Students find themselves engaged in studies for long hours. Increased stress is reported during examination periods. Other stressors specific to medicine include experiences such as dissection, patient interviews, and life and death issues (Shapiro *et al.*, 2000).

Not surprisingly the financial implications of student withdrawals cause concern to the administrators and lead to review of the admission policy, the programme and regulations governing promotion of students (Huda *et al.*, 2001). Ziauddin Medical University can reduce the number of withdrawals by early detection of students failing to cope with the academic requirements. The priority is to develop support systems such as a counselling service, a financial assistance programme, sports and cultural activities that provide students with an outlet for self-expression to overcome their academic stress. Also important is to organize an open house to allow interested students to find out more about the College programme prior to admission.

In Pakistan medical schools have yet to publish any data or literature on this issue. Studies are recommended on this as well as on socio-economic and cultural factors influencing withdrawal of students. This will prove

significant in minimizing wastage, not only in terms of finances, but also wastage of time and effort on part of the students that lead to a demoralizing effect.

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