Short Communication

Stressors and Solutions: Addressing the Needs of International Medical Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Medical students face numerous challenges due to demanding academic and environmental requirements set by educational institutions, society, and families. International medical students, in addition, grapple with further hurdles related to their acculturation in a foreign country, including isolation from their family and friends, language and cultural barriers, and individual factors. Although a body of knowledge addresses stressors typical for international medical students in other countries, insufficient attention has been given to this issue in Malaysia, which has recently emerged as an educational hub and a favored destination for young people aspiring to study medicine. It is vital to consider the academic, cultural, and religious aspects of the countries international students come from in the context of their potential acculturative dynamics in the host country. This paper explores factors contributing to stress among international medical students in Malaysia and examines common coping mechanisms relevant to this unique student population. The role of social, institutional, and professional support, religion, language, and personal development has been highlighted. Emphasizing the need for further research to inform tailored interventions aimed at alleviating stress among international medical students and enhancing the educational environment in Malaysian medical schools is crucial.

Keywords

Stressor, Acculturative Stress, Academic Stress, Coping Mechanism, Social And Professional Support, Social Network, Active Coping, Mental Health, International Medical Students, Malaysia

Medical students face unique challenges that might immensely affect their stress levels. The heavy workload, demanding examinations, and high expectations create an atmosphere of tremendous pressure. While a healthy amount of stress can improve learning, too much stress can result in health issues. Several health conditions among medical students have been associated with increased levels of stress, ranging from hair loss and deterioration of oral health to stress-induced diabetes mellitus [1-3].

Global differences in medical education, including course syllabus, teaching-learning culture, and traditional societal perceptions of

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the medical profession, can affect how often and how much stress medical students encounter. For example, obtaining an undergraduate degree in biomedical sciences is a prerequisite for studying medicine in the USA. In contrast, European students can apply to medical school immediately after reaching 18 years old [4]. These structural variations and traditional and cultural factors can affect students' exposure to and perception of stress.

International students must deal with extra difficulties on top of those that every medical student goes through. Though there is an extensive body of research addressing mental health issues among international medical students, most of it concentrates on those enrolled in Western universities [5-8]. Historically, the movement of young people to study medicine was from the East and South to the West. However, in the past decades, other regional centers of medical education have flourished, with China taking the lead in this trend. Subsequently, a recent body of research has emerged, examining mental health issues among international students studying medicine in China [9-11].

Moreover, Southeast Asia has also emerged as an essential hub for medical education, drawing a sizable number of international students to countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia [12]. Despite this trend, there have been very few studies on the mental well-being of international students in this geographic region. International medical students in Southeast Asian countries deal with specific and complex problems shaped by many social, cultural, and educational factors.

Malaysia's international medical student body is remarkably diverse, featuring students from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and China, among others. Many strong reasons draw young individuals who want to study medicine to Malaysia. First, Malaysian medical schools provide high-quality education, rigorous curricula, and modern facilities. Teaching in the English language also helps international students adapt faster to the new environment and succeed academically. Additionally, tuition fees in Malaysia are relatively more affordable compared to higher educational institutions in the USA, UK, or Australia [13-14]. Malaysia is particularly appealing because its culturally diverse environment welcomes students from various backgrounds. Primarily, the country provides extra comfort for students from the Islamic world due to cultural and religious similarities [12].

Conversely, international students contribute cultural insights to create a unique learning community at Malaysian medical education institutions [15]. This paper aims to look into sources of stress among international medical students studying in Malaysia. By exploring these sources, we can tailor specific coping strategies, more effectively help the students, support them in acquiring the medical profession, and enhance the educational environment in medical schools.

ACADEMIC STRESS

Whether they study in their home country or abroad, medical students experience stress associated with high academic workloads and performance expectations. However, international students face more significant challenges because they have to adjust to approaches to teaching and learning adopted by host country medical schools, which might differ from their home countries [16-17]. In addition, an obsession with academic achievement that pervades many Asian cultures results in an additional burden experienced by both Malaysian and international students due to high family or self-imposed expectations for academic success [18].

Besides, barriers related to English language proficiency can contribute to academic stress. Some international students studying medicine in Malaysia barely meet the minimum requirements for English language proficiency, leading to struggles with comprehension of oral and written instructions and learning materials [17]. Also, they cannot demonstrate acquired knowledge and skills during assessments and evaluations [19]. Moreover, since Malaysia is a non-English-speaking nation, international students will likely encounter unusual English accents from peers and faculty members, resulting in additional difficulties in understanding.

Clinical teaching is at the core of medical education, and this is where international students face vulnerability, as effective communication is crucial during clinical sessions [12]. One of the main challenges for international students during clinical years is their lack of knowledge of the local Malay language and poor understanding of the values, beliefs, and culture embedded within the Malaysian healthcare system.

ACCULTURATIVE STRESS

Many international students, including those studying in Malaysia, struggle greatly with acculturative stress,

defined as stress occurring when the experience of adjusting to living in a new country causes problems for students [20-21]. Isolation from home and the absence of familiar faces make it harder to cope with daily challenges and solve problems. Adjusting to a new place is associated with homesickness, loneliness, fear of the unknown, and perceived discrimination [17, 19, 22]. Additionally, international students must manage their living expenses, tuition fees, and finances in a foreign country, contributing to acculturative stress. Financial planning is complicated by constantly changing currency exchange rates, so students must be ready to modify their budgets in response to unanticipated changes, making it difficult to balance academic responsibilities with the demands of daily living [17, 23].

Beyond emotional and financial causes, acculturation stress frequently results from environmental factors, such as housing, physical and social aspects of living, and food. Sharing a house or room with classmates is a significant change for many international students compared to their previous lives with their families, where most of them likely had their own rooms and were supported by their families [24-25]. This change can be challenging, as some students might not be ready to live independently and handle housing issues. Besides, adjusting to their housemates' "difficult" personalities might create a demanding living situation, making their personal and academic lives more challenging. Adapting to the local food is another facet of acculturation. Hot and spicy flavors are a signature of Malaysian cuisine, which might differ from the dietary habits of some international students, especially those from Middle Eastern countries. A lack of familiar foods may cause discomfort while the students become accustomed to their new eating practices and contribute to homesickness and cultural alienation [26].

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS IMPACTING STRESS

Several factors may contribute to different stress levels among international medical students in Malaysia and their reactions to stressors. Age has frequently been mentioned as a factor affecting stress levels among students, although the evidence from the previous studies remains inconsistent. Some research indicates that the burden of academic expectations and adaptation to university life may cause younger students to feel more stressed [27-28]. On the other hand, fear of entering the medical field and stress from managing academic and family or work-related commitments may affect older students more often [29].

Another critical aspect is gender; academic stress has been reported to be more common in women, which might result from gender stereotypes, differences in coping strategies, and social expectations [30]. Nonetheless, personal experiences and cultural norms determine to what degree gender affects stress levels, and the interplay between gender and stress becomes even more complex in the multicultural environment of the international student body.

The next factor worth mentioning is ethnic background. Research from Europe indicates that students from Latin America, Asia, and Africa have higher levels of stress as a result of discrimination and acculturation difficulties [5, 31]. However, more research is needed to determine how these results apply to the Malaysian scenario, as there is insufficient evidence regarding the impact of ethnicity on stress levels among Malaysian international medical students.

Additionally, stress levels among students are very much influenced by the structure and support of their families. The ability of students to manage academic responsibilities and overcome the challenges of living in a foreign country can be significantly influenced by the closeness of family ties and the functionality of the family [32]. It is for instance, individuals from two-parent families or extended families with other distant relatives may be more resistant to acculturative stress than those from single-parent households [33].

Furthermore, personality and character traits such as neuroticism and perfectionism greatly influence how people react to stress. Perfectionistic traits may stimulate academic progress but can also make students feel overwhelmed when they experience failures or hardships. Similarly, tendencies toward emotional instability and anxiety, which often accompany neurotic behavior, can contribute to stress, particularly in unfamiliar and challenging situations [34].

As a result, various stressors affect international medical students in Malaysia, including those associated with academic pressure and acculturation challenges, which are often exacerbated by individual factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, lack of family support, and personality traits. These stressors' impact extends to academic performance and the student's general health. Therefore, understanding effective *coping mechanisms*

is crucial for ensuring a positive educational experience and the overall well-being of international students.

Social and Emotional Support

One of the most common coping strategies international students use is seeking social and emotional support from family members and friends [35]. Regular communication with personal connections through social platforms and video calls significantly reduces homesickness among these students. Additionally, studies have demonstrated that forming new friendships fosters emotional development and enhances students' well-being. A meta-analysis by Bender *et al.* demonstrated a positive correlation between social support and psychological adjustment [36]. Social support was associated with improved academic performance and contributed to international students' positive experiences and overall well-being [37-38].

Social Network

Fostering a sense of belonging, engagement, and connectedness among international students is crucial. Building social networks that include global and local students is imperative [39]. Besides social media and professional networks, niche social networking platforms catering to specific interests, such as photography, arts, music, pet lovers, and gaming communities, are beneficial in connecting international students with like-minded individuals. In addition, forming a solid international community in the university helps organize learning in a supportive environment.

Religion

Religion and mental health have historically been examined as interconnected, with positive faith-based coping providing essential solace during the challenging period [40]. Religiosity has been found to play a significant role in the holistic inner development of individuals, fostering emotional maturity, moral growth, and enhanced self-awareness. Within Malaysia's religiously diverse environment, there is significant potential for individuals from varied religious backgrounds to practice their faith freely.

Culture and Language

It is undeniable that all international students, regardless of their origin, face unique challenges, particularly those related to cultural and language differences. Sociocultural adjustment was found to predict international students' mental health 41 significantly. Studies have shown that international students who actively engage in local cultural events can build friendships and have better adaptability in society. This engagement significantly enhances their social and psychological well-being, reduces acculturative stress, and helps them acquire cultural knowledge and behave in culturally sensitive ways [42]. In Malaysia, international students enrolling in university courses, such as general studies subjects or *Mata Pelajaran Umum* (MPU) in Malay, experience notable improvements in their language skills and confidence levels [43]. Their ability to engage in social interactions is greatly enhanced [44]. Peer support for language practice in both classroom and informal contexts is highly beneficial. Additionally, technology plays a crucial role in aiding language comprehension, particularly in pronunciation and vocabulary expansion [45].

Active Coping

Effective utilization of active coping mechanisms is paramount for students to navigate high academic expectations and adjust to diverse educational systems. Developing proficient time management skills to balance academic responsibilities with personal commitments is essential for academic success and well-being. Research findings suggest that students with good time management skills experience enhanced psychological well-being [46-47]. Additionally, utilization of various educational resources, such as tutoring services, specialized writing support, and participation in professional development workshops, significantly contributes to the academic advancement of international students [48].

Extracurricular Activities

The advantages of engaging in extracurricular activities are manifold. Research has demonstrated that the involvement of international students in extracurricular activities, such as in student associations, clubs, and sports teams, experience notable enhancements in their mental well-being [49-50]. Moreover, such involvement improves grade point averages (GPA) and augments medical knowledge and skills [51]. Active participation in extracurricular pursuits fosters the development of fundamental skills, such as leadership, commitment, time management, and effective communication, which are invaluable for personal and professional growth. Furthermore, engagement in extracurricular activities has been linked to improved emotional intelligence,

including resilience and empathy, underscoring its holistic benefits for international students [52].

Professional Support

Adjusting to a new environment can lead to mental health issues among international medical students. Many international students, including those from Asian backgrounds, often harbor negative beliefs, stigma, and fear of judgment related to mental health issues [53]. Barriers that inhibit disclosure and help-seeking behavior, reduction in negative judgments, and enhancement of mental health literacy among these students are crucial. Whether provided by the university or external healthcare facilities, access to counseling and mental health services is essential as it offers guidance and evidence-based treatments. Offering mental health services, utilizing diverse approaches, assurance of confidentiality, active faculty participation, and provision of suitable physical environments are essential to enhance the quality of mental health support for international student populations [54]. Besides, various psychological approaches, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques, facilitate and improve the psychosocial well-being of international students.

Though coping mechanisms have been proven critical, there remains a significant knowledge gap about how these strategies are particularly tailored to meet the needs of international students studying medicine in Malaysia. These students' unique challenges, including language barriers and cultural differences, call for a more thorough examination of how well various coping strategies work in this environment. To improve academic performance and the general well-being of international medical students in Malaysia, further research is required to develop tailored interventions and support networks that cater to their distinctive needs and experiences.

To conclude, helping students adjust to their new environment and offering enough social support should be one of the priorities for universities. Although this advice applies to both local and international students, the difficulties that international students face upon transitioning to their host country might dictate that they require additional support. Among other strategies, special attention could be paid to improving academic orientation, student counseling, and university language support. Additionally, general awareness about differences in help-seeking behaviors across cultures and individuals should be instilled among university councilors and the community.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

The author reviewed and approved the final version and has agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work, including any accuracy or integrity issues.

DISCLOSURE

The author declares that they do not have any financial involvement or affiliations with any organization, association, or entity directly or indirectly related to the subject matter or materials presented in this editorial. This includes honoraria, expert testimony, employment, ownership of stocks or options, patents, or grants received or pending royalties.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Information is taken from freely available sources for this editorial.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

All authors contributed significantly to the work, whether in the conception, design, utilization, collection, analysis, and interpretation of data or all these areas. They also participated in the paper's drafting, revision, or critical review, gave their final approval for the version that would be published, decided on the journal to which the article would be submitted, and made the responsible decision to be held accountable for all aspects of the work.

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