

Correspondence

Dementia in medical students

DEAR SIRs

The cognitive assessment of a patient is an integral part of the mental state examination. There are several standardised rating instruments to assist in this assessment, but correct scoring is dependent upon the psychiatrist himself being cognitively intact. Our general impression of students undertaking their psychiatry attachments suggested that they had difficulty in answering some of the questions. We therefore wish to report the results of a study undertaken to examine this.

Individuals within two consecutive groups of medical students attached to the psychiatry department were cognitively assessed. The rating scales employed were the information/orientation subtest of the Clifton Assessment Scale (Pattie & Gilleard, 1975), the Abbreviated Mental Test (Hodkinson, 1972), and the memory items of the Camcog section of the Camdex.

All 42 students agreed to the cognitive assessment (100%). On the Abbreviated Mental Test, 21 students (50%), scored the full marks of 10/10. A score of 9/10 was gained by 20 students (47.6%), and one student (2.4%) scored 8/10. The item most commonly failed was the date of the first world war. Using the Clifton Assessment Scale, full marks of 12/12 were gained by 35 students (83.3%), with seven students (16.7%) scoring 11/12.

Low scores were gained on the memory items of the Camcog. The maximum score on this scale is 27. The mean score obtained by the students was 21.7, with a range of 14–25. Common errors included naming Lindberg (42 students; 100%), naming Stalin (27 students; 64.3%), the dates of world war one (22 students; 47%) and world war two (16 students; 38.1%) and describing what Mae West was famous for (18 students; 42.9%).

The Camdex is a comprehensive instrument developed as a valid and reliable measure of the extent of cognitive impairment, which is the central feature in established dementia. High sensitivity and specificity in distinguishing dementia and acute confusional state from functional psychiatric illness or no illness have been demonstrated. The memory items of the Camcog are only one part of the overall instrument; however extrapolation of the original study suggests scores less than 20 to indicate dementia. Using this criteria, ten medical students (23.8%) were inflicted with dementia. We were initially concerned by this finding until, on reflection, we recognised the

potential benefit to those demented patients in contact with these students. The demented medical students would be more able to empathise with their demented patients.

The Abbreviated Mental Test corresponds to the ten most discriminating items of the Roth and Hopkins (1953) test of information – memory – concentration; distinguishing well between people with dementia or acute confusional state and people with no illness. Surprisingly, none of the demented students scored below the dementia cut-off of seven. Similarly, reasonable scores were achieved on the Clifton Assessment Scale.

The Camdex was validated on people who were over the age of 65 years in the early 1980s, and its use should be confined to this population. As successive age cohorts grow older, questions within rating scales require updating; medical students may be able to describe Madonna but not Mae West. Psychiatrists who instruct medical students must remember to teach them not only always to conduct a cognitive assessment on the patient, but also what the answers are.

The Bachelor of Medicine examination in psychiatry was passed by 98% of this group of students.

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References

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- PATTIE, A. H. & GILLEARD, C. J. (1975) A brief psychogeriatric assessment schedule. Validation against psychiatric diagnosis and discharge from hospital. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 127, 489–493.
- ROTH, M. & HOPKINS, B. (1953) Psychological test of performance in patients over 60. I. Senile psychosis and the affective disorders of old age. *Journal of Mental Science*, 99, 439–450.

Feedback from patients after public campaigns

DEAR SIRs

I publicly raised some concerns about the College's 'Defeat Depression' campaign (*Guardian Letters*,