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WEB PAPER

Harassment of newly admitted undergraduates by senior students in a Faculty of Dentistry in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Background: Harassment of new students by senior colleagues appears to be widespread in the industrialised countries. Although 'ragging' of new entrants to universities in Sri Lanka gets frequently publicised, its prevalence, severity and the consequences have not been documented.

Aims: This study aims to ascertain the extent of mistreatment of new dental students, the measures they take when harassed and any resulting negative effects.

Methods: We surveyed the year 2008 Dental students using 80 statements dealing with verbal/emotional, sexual and physical harassment. Sixty five students (91.5%) responded anonymously indicating whether a specific action occurred, the degree to which it affected them and any action taken to deal with it.

Results: Fifty percent of students had experienced mistreatment. Verbal and emotional abuse was more frequent than sexual or physical. Eighteen percent experienced sexual harassment, with a significantly higher proportion of males than females reporting it. A fifth of the students had upsetting memories of the event. Eighty five percent of the respondents stated that they did not suffer any ethnic or racial discrimination.

Conclusions: Emotional harassment of new students by the seniors is a pervasive, yet under-reported problem. Definitive interventions need to be implemented to prevent untoward consequences that can undermine the educational goals of training.

Introduction

Students embarking on undergraduate studies enter a world of considerable stress and anxiety. In addition to the educational, interpersonal and societal obligations that they have to deal with, their fears about and experiences of harassment could be added causes of anxiety, which may have far reaching consequences. Factors causing stress and anxiety in medical and dental students have been investigated in the industrialised countries: the difficulty of subject content, the pressure of examinations, student anxiety related to the dissection of cadavers or having to deal with patients, financial difficulties (Edwards 1976; Lloyd 1983), the assigned workload, performance pressure, self-efficacy beliefs and the lack of time for relaxation (Rajab 2001; Polychronopoulou & Divaris 2005) have been reported as those that are important.

Documented bullying by senior students, however, had received far less attention, although such harassment may constitute an additional risk factor for anxiety and depression. Although data on harassment of the new entrants by the senior students in the universities and colleges in Sri Lanka are sparse, bullying of the newcomers – commonly known as 'ragging' – is widespread (Hennayake 2008; Gunatilake 2011). Despite the senior students viewing this tradition as a form of initiation of the new students to the university setting, it is not unusual

Practice points

- Harassment of new undergraduates by seniors is common.
- Verbal and emotional abuse is the predominant form of harassment.
- Males are subjected to verbal sexual harassment more than the females.
- Female students discuss harassment with others more than the males.
- Teachers and administrators overestimate the severity of the harassment that new students would experience.

for physical trauma or, on rare occasions, even death or suicide to occur during 'ragging'.

Although, the effect and short-term and long-term consequences of practices such as 'ragging' had not been explored, studies on sexual harassment and gender discrimination of female medical students indicate that such harassment is not only widespread (Sheehan et al. 1990; White 2000; Nora et al. 2002; Larsson et al. 2003; Maida et al. 2003), but result in measurable psychological consequences (Richman et al. 1992; Moscarello et al. 1994). Silver (1982) in an initial investigation suggested that abuse may result in changes in the attitude and behaviour of medical students, and reported that approximately

half of the medical students in a subsequent study sample had been ill treated also by clinical teachers (Rosenberg & Silver 1984; Silver & Glickman 1990; Baldwin et al. 1991).

Mathews (1995) suggested that bringing together students from diverse backgrounds, as happens when admitting candidates for undergraduate studies in Sri Lanka, may give the opportunity for some among the seniors to 'initiate' the new entrants, especially the young women, using cruel and indecent acts of 'ragging'. In spite of the wide publicity, such incidents receive in the national media, there is paucity of documented information on the prevalence and the severity of ill treatment. A recent publication (Jayasinghe 2009), aims to educate the students about the harmful effects of ragging, particularly the health-related ones, yet the objective assessment of the incidence, the effects or the responses of those subjected to ragging appears to be outside its scope. We feel that information obtained, using a structured format, regarding the new students' perceptions about their experiences of harassment by the seniors will be useful in understanding the extent of the problem and identifying appropriate measures to deal with them.

The study reported here is an investigation conducted with respect to the dental undergraduate course in the only dental school in Sri Lanka. It was undertaken to determine the following:

- (1) Extent of perceived mistreatment of dental students, during the period when they start their undergraduate education.
- (2) Measures taken by dental students when they experienced harassment in dental school.
- (3) Negative consequences of the abuse on the dental students' behaviours and attitudes.

Methods

The survey instrument designed by Moscarello et al. (1994), which solicited information about medical students' experiences of mistreatment in medical school and their reactions to such treatment, was used as the basis for our investigation. Although there were very few validated tools with good reliability to assess the level of abuse among clinical students (Cook et al. 1996; White 2000; Stratton et al. 2005; Nagata-Kobayashi et al. 2009), the questionnaire developed by Moscarello et al. was found to possess better measurement properties and was comprehensive. Therefore, we chose it, but selected statements from it were modified to suit the local situation and, where necessary, to match the English language abilities of Sri Lankan dental students.

In our study, we included all the new dental students who had registered at University of Peradeniya in September 2008 and who had not dropped out by the time of this survey in May 2009. The subjects were asked to respond to statements that inquired whether a given action occurred or not by choosing one of two options, while for other statements that required the respondent to indicate the degree to which he or she was affected, a Likert-type rating scale with five-scale points (*not at all*, *a little*, *to some extent*, *very much* and *extremely*) was available. The questionnaire comprising

80 fixed response type items was pilot-tested with 10 students from the target group and then modified accordingly. The proposed plan of investigation including the questionnaire to be used was submitted to the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Dental Sciences and approval obtained.

The survey was conducted at the end of the third month of the English language course during a study period within the routine teaching time. Prior to distributing copies of questionnaire, one of the investigators (NCW) clarified the purpose of the investigation and described the procedure that would be adopted. Expressions and terms that the authors considered may not be sufficiently clear to the students were explained and, where necessary, comparable words or phrases from the students' first languages (Sinhalese or Tamil) were used in the explanations.

The questionnaire that was used in the survey explained *verbal abuse* as 'being spoken to or about in a harmful, disrespectful, hurtful, harsh, unjust manner. To be hated. Unnecessary and avoidable words of a negative nature said by one person to another person(s)'. Although the instrument had originally been developed for use with students in North America, one of the investigators (NCW) clarified the meanings of the phrases and terms using the local languages before the students responded to the statements. It is felt that this step would have helped the subjects to understand what was expected, thus contributing to the validity of the instrument.

It was emphasised that responses were to be made anonymously, to prevent any of the students being identified. The students were also informed that they did not have to write anything unless they wished to do so, further removing apprehensions of the possibility of revealing the identity of the respondent through handwriting.

Data were entered and analysed using SPSS Version 16 (SPSS Inc., USA). Prevalence and 95% confidence interval for extent, type and severity of mistreatment were quantified using appropriate descriptive statistical methods. Stratified analysis by gender was also carried out as gender has been demonstrated to be a major factor in the way students experience and perceive such traumatic experiences. Bivariate association was assessed using chi-squared tests or Fisher's Exact test, whichever was appropriate. Results with *p*-value less than 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

Results

The questionnaire was administered on a regular working day, during a time slot scheduled for a lecture. The students did not know that they were going to face the survey, and everyone present responded. A total of 65 students (91.5% of the year entrants) submitted completed questionnaires.

The group comprised 44 (67.7%) females and 21 (32.3%) males, one of whom, a female, was married. All students were in the age range of 20–23 years, with their ethnicity distributed as Sinhalese: 48 (73.8%), Sri Lankan Tamils: 10 (15.4%), Sri Lankan Moors: 6 (9.2%) and Malay: 1 (1.5%). Religious affiliations were Buddhists: 43 (66.2%), Hindus: 9 (13.8%), Muslims: 7 (10.8%) and Christians: 4 (6.1%).

The parental education level ranged from 11 (16.9%) students with the father having acquired a university degree

Table 1. Verbal or emotional abuse experienced by the new dental students.

| | All students | Males | Females | p-Value |
|---|--------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| <i>Type of verbal/emotional abuse</i> | | | | |
| Yelling/shouting directed at student | 31 (50.0) | 11 (17.7) | 20 (32.3) | 0.587 |
| Being assigned work or duties as punishment rather than for educational value | 10 (16.1) | 2 (3.2) | 8 (12.9) | 0.478 |
| Being intentionally ignored; being made to feel clearly unwelcome and unwanted | 13 (21.3) | 8 (13.1) | 5 (8.2) | 0.008 |
| Racial or ethnic discrimination (e.g. Slurs, jokes, prejudiced remarks, etc.) | 7 (11.3) | 1 (1.6) | 6 (9.7) | 0.412 |
| Threats to your physical integrity (e.g. threatening to hit student, to cause others to harm you) | 6 (9.8) | 3 (4.9) | 3 (4.9) | 0.364 |
| <i>Effect on student</i> | | | | |
| Had repeated upsetting memories of the event | 14 (26.9) | 2 (3.8) | 12 (23.1) | 0.086 |
| Had repeated distressing dreams of the abuse | 1 (1.9) | 0 (0.0) | 1 (1.9) | 1.000 |
| Noticed a reduced interest in or enthusiasm for courses/studies | 13 (24.5) | 6 (11.3) | 7 (13.2) | 0.285 |
| Had difficulty falling or staying asleep | 3 (5.7) | 1 (1.9) | 2 (3.8) | 1.000 |
| Tried to avoid situations or activities that could make student remember the abuse | 15 (28.8) | 5 (9.6) | 10 (19.2) | 0.902 |
| Felt irritable, had outbursts of anger | 12 (23.1) | 7 (13.5) | 5 (9.6) | 0.049 |
| Felt lonely, cut off from others | 8 (15.4) | 2 (3.8) | 6 (11.5) | 0.534 |
| Missed teaching sessions | 4 (7.7) | 2 (3.8) | 2 (3.8) | 0.501 |
| Avoided usual social activities/friends | 9 (17.3) | 5 (9.6) | 4 (7.7) | 0.146 |
| <i>How abuse was dealt with</i> | | | | |
| Discussed with family/close friends | 31 (66.0) | 8 (17.0) | 23 (48.9) | 0.040 |
| Told lecturer/supervisor/student counsellor | 1 (2.4) | 1 (2.4) | 0 (0.0) | 0.183 |
| Reported incident to dean's office | — | — | — | — |
| Complained to the police | — | — | — | — |
| Did nothing; told no one | 9 (22.0) | 5 (12.2) | 4 (9.8) | 0.125 |

or a higher level, 22 (33.8%) possessing technical college/vocational diploma or certificate, to 19 (29.2%) having completed Year 11 in secondary school. The mother's level of educational achievement varied from 8 (12.3%) with university degree or a higher level, 8 (12.3%) possessing technical college/vocational diploma or certificate, 19 (29.2%) having obtained a teacher training certificate, to 23 (35.4%) having completed Year 11 in secondary school.

Extent of mistreatment

Verbal/emotional abuse. Among the three categories of mistreatment (verbal or emotional abuse, sexual abuse and physical abuse), verbal or emotional abuse appeared to be more frequently experienced than the others. Approximately half of the respondents indicated that they experienced some form of verbal abuse (Table 1), with yelling or shouting being the predominant form of verbal abuse. A higher proportion of male students ($p < 0.05$) reported having being intentionally ignored or being made to feel clearly unwelcome and unwanted, resulting in their feeling irritable or having outbursts of anger. As a form of dealing with the abuse, significantly higher proportion of females had discussed the issue with family or close friends.

Sexual mistreatment. Mistreatment of a sexual nature had been experienced by a small proportion of the respondents (Table 2). Unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, hurtful remarks about body, dress, age or gossip about sexual preferences or habits constituted the main form of mistreatment in this category, as reported by 18% of the students.

This form of abuse, as well as being shown pornographic, sexually offensive or degrading pictures, had been experienced by a significantly higher proportion of males than females ($p < 0.05$).

Responses had not been received in the areas listed as unwanted touching of genitals or breasts and non-consensual sex or stared at, leered at or ogled. There was a single respondent under the category of sexual intimacy, promising/involving rewards for sexual favours.

Physical abuse. The proportion of students indicating that they experienced some form of physical abuse was relatively small (4.6%). Being slapped, hit, punched or kicked and pushed, shoved, shaken or tripped and objects thrown at the student had been indicated as the types of abuse experienced.

Gender-based distribution of abuse

Verbal or emotional abuse appears to have occurred more frequently than the other forms, with females reporting this form of harassment to a greater extent than the males (Table 3).

Females reported having experienced verbal and emotional abuse to a greater extent ($p < 0.05$) in the following areas than the male students: yelling/shouting directed at student; being assigned work or duties as punishment rather than for educational value; being intentionally ignored; being made to feel clearly unwelcome and unwanted, and racial or ethnic discrimination (e.g. slurs, jokes, prejudiced remarks, etc.). Higher proportion of female students had also experienced repeated upsetting memories of the events and had tried

Table 2. Sexual abuse experienced by the new dental students.

| | All students | Males | Females | p-Value |
|---|--------------|----------|----------|---------|
| <i>Type of sexual harassment</i> | | | | |
| Being stared or leered at, or ogled | 7 (11.5) | 2 (3.3) | 5 (8.2) | 1.000 |
| Unwelcome sexual comments, jokes; hurtful remarks about body, dress, age, marital status; insulting comments or gossip about sexual preferences or habits | 10 (18.4) | 7 (11.5) | 3 (4.9) | 0.010 |
| Showing of pornographic, sexually offensive or degrading pictures | 3 (5.0) | 3 (5.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0.039 |
| Unwanted sexual advances, involving unnecessary physical contact (e.g. touching, pinching, patting, etc.) | – | – | – | – |
| Sexual intimacy, promising/involving exchange of 'rewards' for sexual favours | 1 (1.6) | 1 (1.6) | 0 (0.0) | 0.344 |
| Unwanted touching of genitals or breasts; non-consensual sex | – | – | – | – |
| <i>Effect on student</i> | | | | |
| Had repeated upsetting memories of the event | 6 (15.8) | 2 (5.3) | 4 (10.5) | 1.000 |
| Had repeated distressing dreams of the abuse | – | – | – | – |
| Notice a reduced interest in or enthusiasm for courses/studies | 4 (10.3) | 3 (7.7) | 1 (2.6) | 0.123 |
| Had difficulty falling or staying asleep | – | – | – | – |
| Tried to avoid situations or activities that could make student remember the abuse | 8 (20.0) | 2 (5.0) | 8 (15.0) | 0.507 |
| Felt irritable, have outbursts of anger | 5 (12.8) | 3 (7.7) | 2 (5.1) | 0.329 |
| Felt lonely, cut off from others | 2 (5.1) | 2 (5.1) | 0 (0.0) | 0.123 |
| Missed teaching sessions | 1 (2.6) | 1 (2.6) | 0 (0.0) | 0.359 |
| Avoided usual social activities/friends | 4 (10.3) | 2 (5.1) | 2 (5.1) | 0.609 |
| <i>How abuse was dealt with</i> | | | | |
| Discussed with family/close friends | 9 (27.3) | 3 (9.1) | 6 (18.2) | 0.663 |
| Told lecturer/supervisor/student advisor | 2 (6.5) | 1 (3.2) | 1 (3.2) | 1.000 |
| Reported incident to Dean's office | – | – | – | – |
| Complained to the police | – | – | – | – |
| Did nothing; told no one | 2 (6.7) | 2 (6.7) | 0 (0.0) | 0.152 |

Table 3. Association between gender and any abuse experienced.

| | All students | Males | Females | p-Value |
|--|--------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| <i>Verbal/emotional abuse</i> | | | | |
| Any type of verbal/emotional abuse | 37 (58.7) | 13 (61.9) | 24 (57.1) | 0.717 |
| Any effect of verbal/emotional abuse | 23 (62.2) | 7 (53.8) | 16 (66.7) | 0.443 |
| Any action taken to deal with verbal/emotional abuse | 34 (91.9) | 11 (84.6) | 23 (95.8) | 0.278 |
| <i>Sexual harassment</i> | | | | |
| Any type of sexual harassment | 15 (24.2) | 8 (38.1) | 7 (17.1) | 0.067 |
| Any effect of sexual harassment | 10 (66.7) | 4 (50.0) | 6 (85.7) | 0.282 |
| Any action taken to deal with harassment | 10 (66.7) | 5 (62.5) | 5 (71.4) | 1.000 |
| <i>Physical abuse</i> | | | | |
| Any type of physical abuse | 6 (9.5) | 4 (19.0) | 2 (4.8) | 0.069 |
| Any effect of physical abuse | 4 (66.7) | 4 (100.0) | 0 (0.0) | 0.067 |
| Any action taken to deal with physical abuse | 3 (50.0) | 3 (75.0) | 1 (7.1) | 0.400 |

to avoid situations or activities that could make them remember the abuse.

Sexual harassment in the form of unwelcome sexual comments and jokes, hurtful remarks about body, dress, age and marital status, insulting comments or gossip about sexual preferences or habits had been experienced by a higher proportion of male students, while a slightly higher proportion of female students than males reported that they were stared at.

Effect of mistreatment on the students

Approximately a quarter of the students (23.1%) had indicated that the verbal or emotional mistreatment they experienced had had some form of overall effect on them, while one half of the respondents (49.2%) felt that it had no effect or that the impact was minimal. The overall effect of sexual or physical

abuse on the students was of a much lower degree than with verbal or emotional abuse.

In dealing with the mistreatment, approximately a quarter (23.1%) of the students tried to avoid situations or activities that recalled the abuse. While a fifth (21.5%) had had upsetting memories of the event repeatedly, a similar proportion (20.0%) had noticed reduced interest or enthusiasm for courses or studies (group totals not mutually exclusive: the same student may have responded under more than one category).

Categories of persons responsible for mistreatment

Table 4 shows the different types of individuals who had inflicted the mistreatment on the new dental students. While approximately a quarter of the respondents had stated that male students in 3rd Year or above had inflicted some of mistreatment on them, a fair proportion of the new entrants

Table 4. Categories of persons responsible for different forms of abuse experienced by new dental students.

| Persons responsible | Type of abuse | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------|------------|--------------|
| | Verbal /emotional (%) | Sexual (%) | Physical (%) |
| 3rd Year or above male student | 17 (26.2) | 5 (7.7) | 6 (9.2) |
| 3rd Year or above female student | 9 (13.8) | – | – |
| Female lecturer or demonstrator | 9 (13.8) | 1 (1.5) | – |
| 2nd Year male student | 4 (6.2) | 3 (4.6) | – |
| Male lecturer or demonstrator | 3 (4.6) | 1 (1.5) | – |
| Outsider | 1 (1.5) | – | – |
| 2nd Year female student | – | – | – |

had implicated 3rd Year female students or female instructors (27.6% of the incidents) as the source of mistreatment.

Discussion

We have documented that harassment by senior students is widespread, with at least half of the group of students surveyed reporting some form of mistreatment at the hands of the senior students during the first few weeks of their university education, and verbal and emotional abuse being much more frequent than sexual or physical abuse. This observation of such a high prevalence of verbal abuse is similar to the findings made in other studies that psychological mistreatment was the most frequently encountered type of abuse (Wolf et al. 1992). The adverse effects of such abuse could be mitigated through measures taken with the aim of enhancing personal growth of students through stress management and self-responsibility for health (Wolf et al. 1992). The fact that a higher proportion of males had reported such abuse may be related to the relative ease with which male students can be accosted in the settings under consideration. Though one may be tempted to associate the lower extent of harassment reported by female students, to the ideology of gender that evolved in the South Asian countries, which entrusts the female with the primary responsibility for rearing and caring for children (Samarasinghe 2000), the existence of unequal power relations between women and men in patriarchal settings may by itself constitute a factor that contributes to promoting violence towards women (Wanasundera 2000). Although the former view may suggest that females are viewed as deserving a greater degree of sympathy than males and less likely to be objects towards which aggressive behaviours are directed (Pinnawala 2004), some workers find that violence against women is prevalent in many settings. The latter investigators state that female students are severely traumatised by the ragging experience, as many are unable to cope with the vulgarity, humiliation, sadism, obscene language, mental torture and cruelty perpetrated on them.

Although the victims had felt irritable and had outbursts of anger, it is reassuring that these situations did not lead to any violent confrontations between the two parties and the

long-term consequences seem to be minimal as the students perceived such treatment by senior students to be more of a joke or as kidding and not a discriminatory practice. The recourse relied on by most of the females who experienced verbal or emotional abuse was discussing the issue with family or close friends. This response, too, appears as natural, especially in the Sri Lankan socio-cultural setting, as many of these students are young females who were recently out of the secondary school environment, and close friends and family members would be the first parties to whom they may turn to for seeking assistance in dealing with problems of this nature.

The subjects in our study appear to have experienced mistreatment of a sexual nature to a relatively smaller extent when compared with the findings reported in previous investigations with students in a mid-Western university in USA and with dental students in another USA university (O'Hare & O'Donohue 1998; Webster et al. 1999). When it occurred, the most common form of abuse reported by the male students fell under unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, hurtful remarks, insulting comments or gossip about sexual preferences or habits. In the case of the female students, the experience worth noting has been being stared at. As all the subjects were young adults in the age range of 20–30 years, one may surmise that those responsible for mistreatment may choose topics or anecdotes of a sexual nature without much inhibition. Yet, we find that the situation was somewhat different from this, possibly as a result of the cultural inhibitions that may still exist in the South Asian countries.

The students had reported that physical abuse occurred to a much lower extent than emotional or sexual abuse. This finding is in sharp contrast to the perception that may have been created in the mind of the average reader by reports in the national media of harrowing incidents of abuse, which result in the new entrants suffering extreme physical damage and requiring long-term hospitalisation and expensive follow-up care (Hennayake 2008; Fonseka 2009; Gunatilake 2011). Although even a single incident of the type alluded to in the media cannot be pardoned, it is some consolation that physical abuse of the new students is not widespread, and when it occurs, it is not of a severe type.

In our study, mistreatment of a sexual nature was limited to verbal comments and to a few incidents of display of offensive pictures. Sexual abuse that involved physical contact or intimacy has not been mentioned by any of the students. These findings appear somewhat different from those reported in investigations in the industrialised countries, where mistreatment is reported as widespread, with females being especially vulnerable to sexual harassment (Phillips & Schneider 1993; O'Hare & O'Donohue 1998). Another factor that may underlie the low level of sexual mistreatment observed in our study could be the reluctance of the students to report abuse in this category.

On the whole, many of the students did not seem to consider the harassment that they faced to be of an extent that had a deleterious effect on their studies or general well-being. This contrasts with the findings observed in many of the studies that had been undertaken with students in the industrialised countries, with reports that the harassment had

led to measurable psychological consequences or to changes in attitude to becoming healthcare workers.

A further point of consternation is that, at least as far as the perception of the new students is concerned, female lecturers or demonstrators had been the source of mistreatment in a fair number of occasions. It is difficult to ascertain from our results whether this observation is a result of a misunderstanding of the statement or a reflection of the real situation. Although reports of mistreatment by tutorial staff is not unusual in other studies (Silver & Glick 1990), the deanery as well as others in the administration need to look into this matter to assess the veracity of the observation and the reasons for the students' perceptions.

A factor that may also play a part in the low incidence of harassment reported could be the influence of the social and economic factors on the value systems and priorities of the students in Sri Lanka. Although the country has witnessed signs of economic improvements, the GDP per capita is approximately \$4900 (Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka 2010) and many students still find it considerably difficult to finance their secondary and tertiary education. Additionally, all universities are government institutions and the total number of seats available for the prospective students is limited. In 2009, out of 199,000 students who sat the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination, 126,000 (63%) had qualified for university entrance, but only 20,000 (16%) of them were able to get enrolled in university education (Abeysekera 2009). The fortunate minority that gets selected for higher education, may, therefore, view any harassment that they would suffer at the hands of the senior students as something that they have to live with if their long-term goals are to be achieved. An attitude that may have implications in this context is how violence, especially against women in domestic settings, is perceived by the victims themselves in countries such as Sri Lanka, who tend to tolerate and conceal it even when extreme and physical (Wanasundera 2000).

Some students had stated that the encounters enabled them to get to know the senior students better. Although mistreatment or harassment of any degree should not be condoned or pardoned, it may be necessary to explore avenues that allow for healthy interaction between the new entrants and the senior students. Attempts made at an individual level at the same university in the past with the hope of identifying healthy alternatives have not been successful (Rathnasiri Bandara 2002). Any measures that are being contemplated by the teaching staff and the administrators need to be pursued with greater vigour than previously and, as far as feasible, should in future be planned and undertaken with the participation of the new students as well as the seniors. If successfully implemented, such endeavours would help to transform the perception of the period of initiation into university life from its current notion in which harassment or abuse is predominant to one where the foundation for healthy relationships and productive engagement is laid by both the senior students and the new entrants.

An additional finding that became evident is the concern of some students that the teaching staff and the administrators place undue emphasis on harassment that would take place

during the initial phase of university life. They had mentioned that they were apprehensive to a high extent although the actual encounters that they faced subsequently did not entail such threat levels and did not warrant such fears.

Following on the measures introduced in the past by the government (Prohibition of Ragging and other Form of Violence in Educational Institutions Act, No.22 of 1998 (Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka 1998)), the University Grants Commission, which oversees all higher education institutions in Sri Lanka, has recently promulgated additional regulations aimed at preventing harassment of the new students by their seniors. The university authorities are now required to report such incidents to the police, and those found guilty of the offences are liable to rigorous imprisonment of up to 10 years, expulsion from the institution of higher education and payment for damages suffered by the victim (UGC 2010). An additional stipulation is that all students pledge in writing that they will not engage in harassment of the new entrants.

It appears necessary to ascertain, through a study that involves all faculties of the university, the scope and the severity of the problem of harassment of the new students, especially because the findings in our study suggest that although harassment of new students is widespread, incidents that cause high levels of physical or mental trauma are not the norm as gauged by the students themselves. As the authorities concerned felt it was necessary to put in place schemes that involve drastic punishments of the wrongdoers, the need for studying the issue of harassment at a greater depth gets highlighted at least as a means of dealing with the apparent mismatch between the perceptions of the administration and those of the 'victims'.

As with any study that solicits personal views, the extent to which the data can be considered valid and as reflecting the actual situation is open to question. The investigators took all feasible measures to ensure that frank opinions were given by the respondents. These included maintaining anonymity of the responses, avoiding periods of examination schedules, involving a trusted teacher who was not viewed as an arm of authority, and explaining difficult terms and expressions and using the mother tongue, where necessary.

It is desirable that the study is replicated in other faculties of the university. The Faculty of Dentistry is a relatively small institution with an annual intake of only 64 students in 2007, which has since increased to 79 in 2008 and 78 in 2009. While its smaller numbers may be a factor that helps building closer contact among students, thus minimising the prevalence or severity of harassment experienced by the new entrants, the situation may be different in the Faculty of Medicine, which has an annual intake of 200, or in the Faculties of Science, Engineering or Arts that admit much higher numbers of students.

Conclusion

New entrants to the undergraduate course in Dental Surgery had suffered a certain degree of mistreatment at the hands of the senior students. While the harassment mostly constituted

verbal or emotional abuse, sexual or physical mistreatment had not been reported to an appreciable extent.

It is important that the university administration puts in place activities and projects that involve the new entrants and the senior students in productive ventures that are planned with the cooperation of and in consultation with both groups of students. Instead of viewing the first few months of university life as a period during which the new students suffer irreparable physical and mental trauma, the administration authorities may find that devoting their energies to promoting healthy interaction between the senior students and the new entrants is an alternative that may prove fruitful. The data collected through the questionnaire and the open comments of some students tend to suggest the direction towards which the administration as well as the 'anti-harassment' groups of students and teachers should move in pursuit of such a goal.

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