

The Experience of the EPA Academia 1st Summer School- Comorbidity between Mental and Physical Disorders

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Introduction

Since its early beginnings, the European Psychiatric Association (EPA) has tried to improve the education of European psychiatrists. In particular, EPA declared its intention to support and meet the needs of young psychiatrists for developing their professional skills and careers. After formation of the EPA Academia for Excellence in European Psychiatry, the EPA's educational mission became enriched with additional training programs and opportunities for young professionals in psychiatry. One of the core aims of the EPA Academia was to meet the contemporary problems in the field of psychiatry and mental health care education.

Comorbidity between physical and psychiatric disorders is considered to be one of the major challenges to psychiatric health care in this century [2]. Often, general physicians, psychiatrists, and doctors of other specialties are not provided with enough skills to meet the needs of patients with somatic and mental comorbidity [3, 4], thus increasing the already existing gap between psychiatry and other medical disciplines [5]. In order to try to overcome this problem and bridge the gap between mental and physical assistance, it would be necessary to target young physicians of all specialties, particularly in the early phases of their careers [1]. However, because most young psychiatrists are indeed aware of the need to develop a range of professional skills [6], the EPA Academia decided to address the problem of comorbidity between mental and physical disorders through the first EPA Academia Summer School on "Comorbidity between mental and physical disorders", and thus meet the young physicians' professional needs. The Summer School was held in Nice in July 2011 for the first time. In this paper, we describe the organization and the structure of the School, as well as the topics addressed and the participants' experience of the course.

Report

Organization

The course, designed by the EPA Committee on Education, was organized out by four members of this Committee: Prof. Henning Sass (Germany), chairman; Prof. Norman Sartorius (Switzerland), Dr. Marc H.M. Hermans (Belgium), and Dr. Andrea Fiorillo (Italy), chairman of the EPA Early Career Psychiatrists Committee. The Summer School, which took place from July 6, 2011 to July 9, 2011, aimed to provide an overview of the problem of comorbidity between mental and physical disorders as well as to develop the participants' ability to recognize and successfully approach the problem. The School was organized in an interactive manner, thus fostering, besides the improvement of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, the communication and networking between the participants.

Participants

Psychiatrists and physicians of other medical specialties, interested in comorbidity between mental and physical disorders, were seen as the eligible candidates for the School. The participants had to be either trainees, or within two years of completion of specialist training, as well as the residents of the countries pertaining to the World Health Organization Europe region. They were recommended by their mother institutions, psychiatric associations, or international trainees associations. The participants had to present their brief CVs and written application stating their interests and intentions. The School received 75 applications from 27 European countries, and after a careful consideration, the Faculty selected the 25 most promising candidates from 17 countries (Brikena Allkoja- Albania; Byurakn Ishkhanyan- Armenia; Barbara Gell- Austria; Nina Kruk- Belarus; Karolien Vekemans- Belgium; Margit Pehk- Estonia; Mika Rautanen- Finland; Fabienne Cyprien, Ksenija Vucurovic, Stéphanie Miot- France; Peter Kreuzer- Germany; Federica Lo Dato, Maria Ferrara- Italy; Nikita Bezborodovs- Latvia; Jeanette BJORKE-Bertheussen, Farzaneh Sardahae, Suraj Bahadur Thapa- Norway; Agnieszka Butwicka, Agnieszka Dyduch- Poland; Albino Jorge Oliveira Maia- Portugal; Bogdan Voinescu-Romania; Slavica Nikolic, Maja Pantovic, Dunja Randjelovic- Serbia; Vladymyr Mykhaylov- Ukraine). The selection was performed according to the candidates CVs, professional aims, and orientation. Furthermore, the selection of the participants aimed to connect different European regions, promising a high degree of dissemination of the topics addressed. In addition to that, the selected participants differed in clinical and research experience, in order to be able to provide different perspectives and constructive discussions on the presented problems. Each participant received a fellowship, provided by the EPA, to cover the School expenses and the accommodation costs.

Structure and Content

The course consisted of three different modules, covering the most prominent problems of comorbidity between mental and physical disorders ("Mental Disorders and Diabetes" by Prof. N. Hermanns, "Mental Disorders and Cancer" by Prof. C. Lauber and "Affective Disorders and Cardiovascular illness" by Prof. D. Wood). The introduction to the modules and the problem of comorbidity was addressed by Prof. N. Sartorius ("Comorbidity between Mental and Physical Disorders") and Prof. H. Sass ("Personality Disorders and Physical Disorders"). Each module consisted of a theoretical overview of the selected topic, given by one of the lecturers, and a short presentation on available pharmacological treatments and their possible side effects (Prof. K. Brøsen). The modules were then followed by two clinical case studies. The case studies, presented in the

practical intervention section of the modules, resulted in a small working group discussion, supervised by the professors. In order to prepare for the course, the participants were previously provided with the school materials, selected papers, presentations, as well as a list of suggested literature.

The lecture of Prof. Sartorius, held during the morning session of the first day of the course, focused on global contemporary problems in the field, and it gave thorough and advantageous overview of the problem to the participants. Prof. Sartorius pointed out to the lack of a mutual and comprehensive picture between psychiatry/psychiatrists and other disciplines when dealing with the frequently neglected problem of comorbidity. Furthermore, he underlined the importance of a high prevalence of comorbidity and the role of stigma as an obstacle for the adequate health care, making the comorbidity one of the major challenges to be addressed nowadays. The lecture was followed by the module on the Mental Disorders and Diabetes. In this module, Prof. N. Hermanns spoke about the role of mental disorders in diabetes, giving a special attention to the association between diabetes and depression. Prof. K Brøsen gave his remarks on the treatment of diabetes, as an isolated phenomenon, as well as on the phenomenon within the psychiatric disorders, pointing out the importance of the metabolic syndrome as a common problem in every day psychiatric practice.

The morning session of the second day began with Prof. Sass' introductory lecture on comorbidity between personality disorders and physical disorders. The lecture provided a comprehensive overview of the subject and the future directions in the classifications of personality disorders. The participants found particularly valuable the remarks on the reformulation of the approach to the assessment and diagnosis of the personality psychopathology, as well as the discussion on the personality changes caused by general medical conditions. The lecture was followed by the module on Cancer and Mental Disorders, held by Prof. C. Lauber, who explained the complex implication of mental health in the early and end-of-life stages of cancer as well as a possible role of certain mental health disorders in patients with cancer. The module provided significant information on the therapeutic principles to be applied to these groups of patients, and it gave directions to further research in the field. The presentation in psychopharmacology complemented the lecture, and it underlined the importance of individualized therapy due to the target treatment of different molecular subtypes of the same disease.

The module on Affective Disorders and Cardiovascular Illness was delivered during the third day, under the guidance of Prof. D. Wood. The importance of prevention of cardiovascular diseases (CVD) in the clinical practice was the crucial message of this module. Furthermore, the clear assessment of the cardiovascular risk factors of patients with mental disorders, as well as the pharmacotherapy of CVD, is essential for the management of their mental and physical conditions.

Each module was concluded with the participants' contribution to the course by small working group discussions on case studies. During the discussions, the participants were also encouraged to develop other professional skills, like presenting a case or chairing a group. After small working group discussions, the groups were reunited in order to present their conclusions in a joint discussion. The participants' clinical knowledge and practical skills showed to be sufficient to meet the challenges of the presented material, raise important clinical and research questions, and engage in constructive and vigorous discussions. However, it was evident that the participants not only showed different clinical, therapeutical, and socio-economic understanding, but also different approaches to treating the comorbidity, indicating the difference in training and cultural background.

Participants' feedback

In order to assess the degree of the relevance of the School, the participants were presented, at the end of each day, with the evaluation form with a list of questions including the relevance of the respective topics, the adequacy of the information provided during the lectures, and the overall impression with the selected topic and the lecturers. Then, they had the possibility to give their comments, suggestions for improvement, or express their particular interests. Overall, the course fulfilled the participants' expectations and received very high ratings. The School was appreciated by the participants for its unique content and the relevance of the information provided for the development of the clinical and research skills.

Conclusion

It can be considered that the 1st EPA Academia Summer School fulfilled its educational objectives, and it is expected to become an annual EPA event. One of the first steps towards spreading the knowledge gained would be to organize regional courses on the same topic, by the participants, in their respective countries, and thus raise the awareness of the psychiatric public about the importance and frequency of comorbidity between mental and physical disorders. The difference in scientific experience and clinical skills of the participants indicate a disparity in the training programs across Europe, which could be overcome by similar educational programs, creating a promising way for postgraduate training. However, long term effects of the School are yet to be evaluated. It is expected that the School will give a valuable contribution to development of academic careers of the participants. Furthermore, it provided a good basis for establishing an international network of young psychiatrists, dealing with not only comorbidity, but also engaging, in the future, in many other initiatives.

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