



RESEARCH

HEALTH SCIENCE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND AWARENESS OF ELDER ABUSE AND NEGLECT

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Healthcare professionals have a key role in detecting and reporting elderly abuse and neglect, which is becoming more widespread due to the increase in the elderly population. However, there are very few studies evaluating the perception and understanding of students studying in health science branches about elderly abuse and neglect.

Materials and Method: This descriptive cross-sectional research was conducted with 385 students who were studying in the departments of nutrition and dietetics, physiotherapy and rehabilitation, and nursing. The questionnaire form, which was prepared by the researchers based on the relevant literature, has been used with the aim of collecting data for this study.

Results: Although the majority of the students (92.7%) have indicated that they were aware of the concept of elderly abuse and neglect, it was observed that the students couldn't define the concept of elderly abuse either comprehensively or clearly. It was determined in our study that the type of abuse mostly known by these students was physical abuse, and thus their knowledge about abuse was insufficient. It was observed that the number of students who receive education about this concept was higher in the nursing department when compared to the other departments ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: This study indicates that the students who are studying in health sciences do not receive adequate education for gaining awareness about the concept of elderly abuse and neglect.

Keywords: Students; Aged; Elder Abuse



INTRODUCTION

Elder abuse is a global problem that is gaining recognition due to its severe impact on the aging population in recent years (1). Several measures have been identified that families, institutions, and society can take to recognize and prevent elder abuse and neglect. These measures include training healthcare professionals about abuse and violence against the elderly and improving their service delivery capabilities (2). Today, it is well-known that healthcare professionals' ability to identify and respond appropriately to suspected cases of elder abuse and neglect is essential in improving the protection of older adults (3). However, previous studies indicate that healthcare professionals do not have sufficient knowledge about elder abuse and neglect, and thus they are not aware of the related laws and regulations (4,5).

All healthcare professionals are responsible for addressing elder abuse and neglect. Departments of nursing, nutrition and dietetics, and physiotherapy and rehabilitation are among these professions. When the undergraduate education programs in Turkey were examined, it was found that various departments of health professionals included sections on elder care and geriatric services. These students are candidates to serve the aging society (6,7).

It is not known whether the topic of elder abuse and neglect is included in the content of these education programs. Previous studies have reported that healthcare professionals do not take appropriate actions in response to abuse as they lack the necessary training to identify and report such cases (5,8,9). Thus, it is essential that undergraduate education programs provide healthcare professionals with the knowledge and skills to identify and respond appropriately to cases of elder abuse and neglect (8). Especially considering the change in age demographics in Turkey, the recognition and prevention of elder abuse must be prioritized to achieve the country's

health goals and future needs. Thus, this study was performed with the aim of investigating health science students' perceptions and awareness of elder abuse and neglect.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. Design

This is a descriptive study with the aim to investigate perceptions and awareness of elder abuse and neglect by health science students.

2. Procedures and participants

The study was conducted with students who were studying at Gazi University, Faculty of Health Sciences, during the 2015–2016 academic year. The research population comprised of students studying in the department of nursing (948 students), physiotherapy and rehabilitation (396 students), and nutrition and dietetics (316 students). The data were collected by means of a questionnaire completed by 385 students who voluntarily participated in the study after its purpose was explained.

The sample consisted of 316 students. The mean age of students was 20.10 ± 1.64 years; 85.5 % of them were female, 37.7% were first-year, 37.9% second-year, 19.2% third-year and 5.2% fourth-year students. A total of 48.6% of students were in the nursing department, 38.4% in the nutrition and dietetics department, and 13.0% in the physiotherapy and rehabilitation department. In the sample group, 48.6% reported that they had never lived with an elderly individual, 42.1% had previously lived with an elderly person, 9.4% were currently living with an elder (Table 1).

3. Data Collection Tools

A questionnaire based on the literature was prepared by the researchers as the data collection tool (1,5,8,9). The questionnaire comprised two sections: the first section included 15 questions about sociodemographic characteristics (such as

Table 1. Characteristics of Students (n = 385)

Identifying Characteristics	Number	%
Age $\bar{x} \pm SD$: 20.10 \pm 1.64 Min:18 Max:30		
18-21	327	84.9
22-25	52	13.5
26 and over	6	1.6
Sex		
Female	329	85.5
Male	56	14.5
Department		
Nursing	187	48.6
Nutrition and Dietetics	148	38.4
Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	50	13.0
Year Level		
First year	145	37.7
Second year	146	37.9
Third year	74	19.2
Fourth year	20	5.2
Living with an older person		
Previously lived	162	42.1
Currently living	36	9.4
Never lived	187	48.6

age, gender, and university year level), and the second section included 20 statements related to types of elder abuse and neglect, and 12 questions asking students whether or not they were familiar with concepts of abuse and neglect, which were designed to evaluate students' knowledge and awareness. Some of the questions in the second part were prepared as close-ended questions, and some of them were prepared as options. The students were asked questions with an answer of two options: "The status of previously receiving education on elder abuse and neglect" (received and hadn't received), "The status of previously having encountered an elderly individual who was exposed to abuse and negligence" (encountered and hadn't encountered) and "The state of knowing the concept of abuse and neglect" (aware

and unaware). While evaluating the knowledge of the students regarding the concept of abuse and neglect, they were asked to choose from the expressions defining the concepts of elderly abuse and neglect and it was stated to them that they could select more than one option. In addition, the participants were given some statements about the types of abuse and were asked to write down which concept of abuse or negligence these statements correspond to. The percentage of correct or incorrect answers given to these statements was evaluated. It was stated to the students that they could give more than one answer to the questions about "The source from which they obtained information about the concept of abuse and neglect and the type of elderly abuse encountered" and "The type of elderly abuse encountered".



Students who were willing to participate in the study were given the questionnaire during a class session. The researchers were present to explain any questions that the students did not understand. The questionnaire took 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and the completed questionnaires were collected after the end of the class.

4. Data Analysis

The SPSS 17.0 package software was used to analyze the data obtained in the research. Number and percentile and Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were used in the evaluation of the data. Chi-square testing was used to compare education status in terms of department and year level with students' knowledge of elder abuse and neglect; p values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Of the students who participated, 92.7% stated they were aware of the concept of elder abuse and neglect. However, it was determined that the majority of the students (63.6%) were not able to define the concept of elder abuse comprehensively or clearly. These students defined abuse as *"Behaving in an undesired way/misbehaving towards an individual."* On the other hand, 48.2% of the students defined neglect as *"Not taking care of an individual sufficiently."* Only 6% of the students ($n=23$) stated that they had previously received education/training on the concepts of abuse and neglect, and the majority of the students (82.1%) stated that the source of their knowledge about these concepts was television. Meanwhile, 81.6% of the students stated they had previously seen an elderly individual who was exposed to abuse and neglect, and more than half of the students (56.3%) stated that they had seen cases where elders had been abused physically (Table 2).

The option selected most frequently by students for the physical type of abuse was *"Slapping, hitting,*

kicking, pushing an elder or the use of force by someone who takes care of the elder or is trusted by the elder" (97.7%). The option most frequently selected by students for the type of psychological abuse was *"Humiliating, insulting the elderly by someone who takes care of the elderly or is trusted by the elderly"* (96.9%). The option most frequently selected by students for the type of economic abuse was *"Stealing money or property in a legal or illegal way from the elderly by someone who takes care of the elderly or who is trusted by the elderly"* (93.2%). The option most frequently selected by students for the type of sexual abuse was *"Taking photos with explicit sexual content of the elderly without his/her consent"* (91.4%). The option most frequently selected by students with regard to neglect was *"Not taking care of the elderly intentionally or unintentionally, leaving him/her alone for a long time"* (75.6%) (not shown here due to restricted number tables).

The majority of the students ($n = 362$, 94%) had not received any formal education about elder abuse and neglect (Table 2). A statistically significant difference was found between students from different departments within the university in terms of whether they had received any formal education on elder abuse and neglect in their program ($p < 0.05$). Students from the nursing department had a higher rate of having received education/training on this subject compared to students from nutrition and dietetics and physiotherapy and rehabilitation departments (respectively; 10.2%, 2.0%, 2.0%). There was also a significant difference in terms of receiving education on elder abuse and neglect according to the year level of students; it was determined that this education was provided mostly in their second year ($p < 0.05$) (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

Elder abuse is a complex phenomenon encompassing a wide range of harms that directly

Table 2. Students' Knowledge and Experience Related to Elder Abuse and Neglect (n=385)

Receiving education previously on elder abuse and neglect	n	%
Received	23	6.0
Haven't received	362	94.0
Knowledge of the concept of elder abuse		
Aware	357	92.7
Unaware	28	7.3
†Definition of the concept of abuse (n = 357)		
Behaving in an undesired way/misbehaving towards an individual	227	63.6
Behaving unjustly towards an individual by ignoring his/her fundamental rights and freedoms	113	31.6
Causing damage to an individual by using force against him/her	38	10.6
Excluding someone/showing no interest in an individual	10	2.8
†Definition of the concept of negligence (n = 357)		
Not taking care of an individual sufficiently	172	48.2
Not satisfying the needs of an individual	150	42.0
Depriving an individual of his/her rights	18	5.1
Not providing necessary assistance to an individual	9	2.5
Causing damage to an individual	6	1.7
†The source with respect to concepts of abuse and negligence (n:357)		
Television	293	82.1
Books/newspapers	185	51.8
Internet	166	46.5
School education	113	31.7
Internship practice	32	9.0
Friend/family/neighbors	19	5.3
Having encountered an elderly individual who was exposed to abuse and negligence		
Encountered	71	18.4
Haven't encountered	314	81.6
†Type of elderly abuse encountered (n = 71)		
Physical	40	56.3
Psychological	30	42.3
Economic	27	38.0
Neglect	27	38.0
Sexual	12	16.9

†Multiple responses were permitted.

**Table 3.** Receiving Education on Elder Abuse and Neglect According to Department and Year Level (n = 385)

Departments	Those who received training		Those who did not receive training	
	Number	%	Number	%
Nursing	19	10.2	168	89.8
Nutrition and Dietetics	3	2.0	145	98.2
Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation	1	2.0	49	98.0
Fisher's Exact Test (x2)= 10.798, p:0.04				
Year level				
First year	4	2.8	141	97.2
Second year	12	8.2	134	91.8
Third year	1	1.4	73	98.6
Fourth year	6	30	14	70.0

Fisher's Exact Test (x2)= 19.297,p:0.00

affect the lives of older people. Although elder abuse has been well documented in the literature, there has been little consensus on a clear definition (10,11).

Although the majority of the students in our study indicated that they were familiar with the concept of elder abuse and neglect, they were not able to provide a clear definition. Nearly half of the students described the concept from a single perspective, such as physical or economic abuse. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines elder abuse as an intentional act, or failure to act, by a caregiver or another person in a relationship involving an expectation of trust that causes or creates a risk of harm to an older person (12). This includes psychological, physical, financial/material and sexual abuse, as well as intentional or unintentional neglect. (13). However, none of the students were able to provide a clear and comprehensive definition of the concept.

Many studies have identified the barriers and difficulties that health professionals face in identifying and reporting cases of elder abuse (4,10,11,14,15). Therefore, it is important for healthcare students to recognize the signs and

types of elder abuse and neglect. In our study, it was determined that the type of abuse best known by the students is physical abuse; thus, their knowledge about detecting abuse was insufficient. Like our study, a study conducted by Lo et al. (2010) established that most first and third year nursing students were familiar with physical abuse, but their understanding of elder neglect was insufficient (8). Interest in studies that evaluate the knowledge, attitudes, or awareness of healthcare professionals with respect to elder abuse and neglect has increased in recent years. However, there are few studies focusing on students' or professionals' knowledge, awareness, and understanding of elder abuse and neglect. Furthermore, there aren't many studies on the reasons for the underreporting of elder abuse and neglect (11,16,17). For this reason, students who will eventually work in the field of healthcare must receive an education and training that will provide them with sufficient knowledge and capabilities in this field. This study revealed that the majority of the students had not received an adequate education on elder abuse and neglect.

Elder abuse prevention and intervention is a multidimensional subject that requires interdisciplinary collaboration. However, previous

studies have found that healthcare professionals are not sufficiently prepared on the subject and they require education and practice (15,16,18). The fact that only 6% of the students participating in our study had received education at school on elder abuse supports these conclusions. In addition, most of the students had been informed about elder abuse and neglect only by means of television, books/newspapers, and the Internet. Technology may provide information on physical abuse, which is the most easily identified type of abuse. However, it should be noted that the information obtained from non-scientific sources may not always be reliable.

In the present study, a significant majority of the students stated that they had never encountered an elderly individual who had been exposed to abuse and neglect, and very few students (6%) stated that they had received any education about elder abuse. Several studies in the literature reported findings consistent with our study (8,9,19,20). All studies have shown that education is essential to increase healthcare students' knowledge and awareness about elder abuse and the recognition of elder abuse.

The present study revealed a statistically significant difference between students in different departments in terms of having received any education about elder abuse and neglect. The number of students who had received education on this subject was higher in the nursing department when compared to other departments ($p < 0.05$). When the education program of departments of nutrition and dietetics and physiotherapy and rehabilitation in Turkey are examined, it is considered that elder care is addressed as part of professional knowledge but not covered comprehensively, especially in terms of elderly abuse according to nursing. Moreover, approaches to elder abuse may differ according to professional orientation such as professional position, education, values, and experience (18). For this reason, the knowledge level of students may differ.

In the present study, it was determined that fourth year students had received more education on elder abuse and neglect compared to students in earlier years ($p < 0.05$). In a similar study conducted with pharmacy students, 60% of fourth year students had received education on elder abuse and neglect (21). The higher a student's year level, the more likely it was that they had received education on elder abuse and neglect, and correspondingly, they had greater knowledge of the subject. However, when we examine the levels of education received, it is evident that the levels are not at the desired level.

CONCLUSION

In our study, although the majority of the students indicated that they were familiar with the concept of elder abuse and neglect, the students were not able to define the concept comprehensively and clearly, and they described elder abuse from a single perspective; thus, it is concluded that the knowledge level of the students is not sufficient. Moreover, when the students' educational programs were analyzed, it was observed that only a few physical therapy and dietitian students had received any education about elder abuse, and even though nursing students had received more education on elder abuse, their knowledge was still not at the desired level. Based on these conclusions, raising awareness and increasing knowledge about elder abuse and neglect should be ensured by including practical and detailed courses on elder abuse in the education programs for these professional groups as they are very likely to work with elderly populations in their future careers.

ETHICAL DIMENSION OF THE RESEARCH

Necessary permissions were obtained from Gazi University, Faculty of Health Sciences and Gazi University Ethical Committee to perform this study. Consent was received from the students who



agreed to participate in this study to protect their rights; they were informed of the purpose of the study and were reminded that they had the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

One strength of our study is that it is the first study on elderly abuse and neglect conducted with physiotherapy, dietetic, and nursing students; since these are professions that are very likely to work with elderly populations. A limitation of this study is that it was performed at a single center, and therefore, it is not possible to generalize our results. The study is limited to the data obtained from students who

were attending school on the dates when the data collection tools were applied and from students who agreed to participate in the study.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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