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“Asian American Medical Students Mental Health and Social Support Needs”

Background: Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, Asian Americans have faced a drastic increase in racism, from microaggressions to violence. Previous studies have found that approximately 1 of 3 Asian Americans have experienced direct racial discrimination online, and half of Asian Americans reported experiencing in-person racial discrimination directly. Through the rise of social media and online news outlets amidst the pandemic, Asian Americans also experience a higher exposure of vicarious racism, or the witnessing of other Asian Americans being discriminated against. Previous studies have found a strong, negative association between this COVID-19-related racial discrimination and psychological well-being amongst Asian-Americans, as well as a strong relationship between microaggressions and burnout amongst medical students. However, few studies have explored the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Asian-American medical students, despite Asian Americans making up 21.5% of medical students in the United States.

Objective: This study sought to determine how COVID-19 related discrimination impacted the mental health and academic functioning of Asian American medical students.

Method: A survey tool comprised of the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), depression history, mental health stigma, coping mechanisms, social support, and two open-ended questions about the impacts of COVID-19 related discrimination and medical school mental health support in the form of a SurveyMonkey online form was distributed through online listservs and organizations to Asian-American medical students nationally. Qualitative analysis was conducted on the open-ended questions, in which the data was labeled with recurring themes and parent themes using Microsoft Excel.

Results: Of 36 individuals who responded to our survey, 23 responded to our open-ended questions. In our preliminary qualitative analysis, the most common themes of the responses to the question, “How has racial injustice towards the Asian American community or other minority individuals that have occurred over the past year impacted you?” included experiences of discrimination (e.g. direct discrimination, vicarious discrimination, exclusion, microaggressions, and being stereotyped); emotional reactions (e.g. fear, safety concerns, frustration about the lack of exposure, and awareness of race and white privilege); effects on medical school performance (e.g. burnout, negative effect upon everyday life, racism in school); a feeling of and searching for community; and the role of media in increasing awareness.

Conclusion: Responses indicate that students experienced negative impacts on their academic functioning and mental health due to COVID-19 related discrimination as individuals who identify as Asian American medical students. Further exploration is needed regarding how resources should be allocated to support Asian American medical students and their mental health needs both academically and socially while in medical school.