



**ATTITUDE TOWARDS HOMOSEXUALITY AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS OF
PRIVATE MEDICAL COLLEGE IN UTTAR PRADESH (INDIA)**

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ABSTRACT

Background: Homosexuality is "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions" to people of the same sex. Homophobia is prevalent in India. Public discussion of homosexuality in India has been inhibited by the fact that sexuality in any form is rarely discussed openly. In recent years, however, attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted slightly. Aim: This study aimed to evaluate Indian medical students (undergraduate, postgraduate medical students) attitude towards homosexuals. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted on a sample of undergraduate medical students and postgraduate medical students studying in an Indian private medical college. The participants filled the Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire (AHQ). AHQ consisted of 20 statements scorable on a 5-point Likert scale. **Results:** Among Undergraduate and postgraduate Medical student, Females had more positive attitudes towards homosexuals. Conclusion: Enhancing knowledge of medical students by incorporation of homosexuality related health issues in the curriculum could help reduce prejudice towards the sexual minority and thus impact their future clinical practice.

KEYWORDS: Attitude, homosexuality, India, Under graduate & Post graduate medical students.

INTRODUCTION

As a sexual orientation, homosexuality is "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions" to people of the same sex. It "also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviours, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions."^{[1][2]}

Scientists do not know the exact cause of sexual orientation, but they believe that it is caused by a complex interplay of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences,^{[3][4][5]} and do not view it as a choice.^{[3][4][6]}

The most common terms for homosexual people are *lesbian* for females and *gay* for males, though *gay* is also used to refer generally to both homosexual males and females. The number of people who identify as gay or lesbian and the proportion of people who have same-sex sexual experiences are difficult for researchers to estimate reliably for a variety of reasons, including many gay or lesbian people not openly identifying as such due to homophobia and heterosexist discrimination.^[7]

Homosexuality is mostly a taboo subject in Indian civil society and for the government. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code makes sex with persons of the same

gender punishable by law. On 2 July 2009, in *Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi*, the Delhi High Court held that provision to be unconstitutional with respect to sex between consenting adults, but the Supreme Court of India overturned that ruling on 11 December 2013, stating that the court was instead deferring to Indian legislators to provide the sought-after clarity.^[8]

Homophobia is prevalent in India.^{[9][10]} Public discussion of homosexuality in India has been inhibited by the fact that sexuality in any form is rarely discussed openly. In recent years, however, attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted slightly.

Hinduism has taken various positions, ranging from homosexual characters and themes in its texts to being neutral or antagonistic towards it. Rigveda, one of the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism says *Vikriti Evam Prakriti* (Sanskrit: विकृतिः एवम् प्रकृतिः; meaning what seems unnatural is also natural)^[11], which some scholars believe recognises homosexual/transsexual dimensions of human life, like all forms of universal diversities.^[12]

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) has already recognized that it is not a disorder. Considerable evidence has shown that the LGBT population has unique physical and mental health care needs. Yet, they tend to avoid routine health care for the fear of stigmatization by the medical community.^[13]

Few Studies done in Australia, China and Serbia have also found medical students tend to be prejudiced against the now increasingly visible sexual minority.^[14,15,16] so we planned this study to assess the attitudes among medical students in private medical college in India.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Center

Aim of the study

1. To study the Attitude towards homosexuality among undergraduate & postgraduate medical students at Teerthanker Mahaveer University, Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh in India
2. This cross-sectional study was conducted at the University Teerthanker Mahaveer Medical College & Research Center (TMMC& RC) Moradabad in U.P. This center serves as a mci recognized training center for medical students who undergo undergraduate (MBBS) training & post-graduate (MD) training in various fields of specialization which are offered there.

Participants

Inclusion criteria

Under graduate medical students & Post graduate medical Students willing to participate.

Exclusion criteria

Under graduate & Post graduate Students suffering from major mental illness.

Study procedure

The first year (second semester), second year (fourth semester) and third year (sixth semester) medical students were approached during a lecture session after permission from the respective heads of department. The students were told that they would receive briefing about a new study, but the nature of the study was not told to them.

PG Students were approached on a one to one basis by one of the authors.

Survey instruments

Baseline demographics

Age, gender, religion, marital status, sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual),

The Attitudes towards Homosexuals Questionnaire (AHQ)

It contains 20 statements regarding homosexuals, their lifestyle, and their social position and is scored by the participants on a 5-grade Likert type scale ranging from

1 ("Strongly agree←) to 5 (→Strongly disagree←). Some items require an inverse scoring. The score range on this scale was 20-100, with a higher score indicating a more negative attitude towards homosexuals. This instrument is also a compilation of items used in three previous studies.^[17,18,19]

Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data, frequencies and percentages for categorical variables and mean values with standard deviations for continuous variables. SPSS 20.0 was used for data analysis. Significance was set at $P < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

RESULTS

Table -1, displays the socio-demographic characteristics of the study population. The sample had a male preponderance and a majority of the participants were Hindus. The mean age of the respondents was 20.04 (SD = 1.62) years, range 17-25. All the participants except one identified themselves as heterosexuals. The least participation in the study was from postgraduate residents, who accounted for only 12.7% of the study population.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the study sample (N = 244).

Variable	Mean (S.D.)/n (%)
Age	20.04 (1.62)
Gender	
Male	137 (56.1)
Female	107 (43.8)
Religion	
Hindu	218 (89.3)
Others*	26 (10.7)
Designation	
1 st year U.G.†	71 (29.0)
2 nd year U.G.†	92 (37.7)
3 rd year U.G.†	50 (20.5)
post graduate residents	31 (12.7)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	243 (99.6)
Homosexual	1 (0.4)
Bisexual	0
Marital Status	
Unmarried	241 (98.7)
Married	3 (1.3)

*Others included Muslims, Jains, Christians, Undergraduate student

Table-2 shows the association of gender, designation and religion with attitude towards homosexuality. Females were found to have a more positive attitude towards homosexuals vis-à-vis males. Postgraduate students and under graduate students of third year, first and second year score difference did not reflect in their attitude towards homosexuals.

Among non-Hindus and Hindus, difference in their attitude was not statistically significant.

Table-2: Association of gender, designation and religion with attitude towards homosexuality (N = 244).

Variable	Score on AHQ [†]	
	Mean (S.D.)	Significance t/F P value
Gender		
Male	57.7 (7.7)	<i>t</i> =2.463
Female	55.5 (9.5)	<i>P</i> =0.014
Designation		
1 st year U.G. [‡]	57.2 (7.0)	F=1.240
2 nd year U.G. [‡]	56.5 (8.9)	<i>P</i> =0.334
3 rd year U.G. [‡]	57.1 (8.0)	
Post graduate residents	54.0 (5.7)	
Religion		
Hindu	56.8 (8.0)	<i>t</i> =1.680
Others	53.8 (12.6)	<i>P</i> =0.094

*[†]Attitudes towards homosexuals questionnaire, [‡]Undergraduate students, post graduate medical students

Table-3 presents the mean scores obtained on each item of the AHQ. Negative attitudes towards homosexuals were most reflected on statements like “If gay men want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality/culture”, “In today's tough economic times, tax money shouldn't be

used to support gay men's organizations”, “Gay men have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights”, and “I would not be too upset if I learned that my son was homosexual.” The mean total score of the respondents on the AHQ was 56.52 (SD 8.63), range 25-85.

Table-3: Response on attitudes towards homosexual's questionnaire.

Statement	Response Mean ± SD
Homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle that should not be condemned	2.48±0.90
Gay men do not have all the rights they need	2.86±1.01
Celebrations such as “Gay Pride Day” are ridiculous because they assume that an individual's sexual orientation should constitute a source of pride	3.07±0.97
Gay men still need to protest for equal rights	2.61±0.85
If gay men want to be treated like everyone else, then they need to stop making such a fuss about their sexuality/culture	3.49±0.86
Gay men who are “out of the closet” should be admired for their courage	2.87±0.99
In today's tough economic times, tax money shouldn't be used to support gay men's organizations	3.28±0.90
Gay men have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights	3.18±0.85
It would be beneficial to society to recognize homosexuality as normal	2.63±1.00
Homosexuals should not be allowed to work with children	2.62±1.04
The homosexuals should have equal opportunity of employment	2.15±0.87
Homosexuals should be allowed to marry	2.5±0.97
Homosexuals should be given social equality	2.36±0.94
I think male homosexuals are disgusting	2.72±0.99
If a man has homosexual feelings, he should do everything he can do to overcome them	2.94±1.02
I would not be too upset if I learned that my son was homosexual	3.16±0.97
Homosexual couples should be allowed to adopt children just like heterosexual couples	2.52±0.96
Homosexuals are sick	2.57±0.99
Just as in other species, male homosexuality is a natural expression of sexuality in human man	2.48±0.90
Many gay men use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges	3.13±0.74

DISCUSSION

There is dearth of Indian literature that has systematically investigated issues related to homosexuality, and in our study we tried to make such effort to study the attitude of medical students towards the same in an Indian set up. Western medical school curricula inadequately address and give very less time to

the health and sexuality issues of LGBT people.^[20,21] In absence of any publications or formal reports, it is not exactly known how much importance medical curriculum gives to homosexuality and related health issues in India, although it may be apprehended that it may not be getting its due, which is reflected in the low knowledge level of students in this study.

Lack of disclosure of sexual orientation to physicians significantly decreases the likelihood that appropriate health services are recommended to such patients.^[22] On the brighter side, previous research shows that practicing physicians and medical students alike have expressed the need to include such training at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Greater clinical exposure to LGBT patients at the undergraduate level enhances knowledge of LGBT health care concerns and brings about a more positive attitude,^[23] further emphasizing the need.

The Association of American Medical Colleges has recommended that “medical school curricula ensure that students master the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to provide excellent, comprehensive care for LGBT patients” by including “comprehensive content addressing the specific healthcare needs of LGBT patients” and “training in communication skills with patients and colleagues regarding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.”^[24] Laying of such guidelines or recommendations, though highly desired has eluded the Indian medical education scenario.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study gives preliminary insight into the attitude of Indian medical students about homosexuality, although further research on a larger scale is needed across the country to have a more comprehensive impression about the stand of medical students on the issue, which could help to draft guidelines on inclusion of homosexual patients’ health needs in the Indian medical curriculum. Medical students need to be trained to maintain a non-homophobic attitude and to be aware about how their own attitude affects clinical judgment.^[25] Enhancing knowledge of medical students by adequate incorporation of LGBT issues in the curriculum could help reduce practicing doctors’ prejudice faced by LGBT patients and improve the health care offered to such patients.

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