Eating Disorders Detection in Female University Students

Sir,

Eating disorders entailing bulimia, anorexia, and binge eating are more common in women and a significant source of morbidity and mortality burden. Compared to men, women are three times more likely to experience bulimia (0.5% versus 1.5%) and anorexia (0.3% versus 0.9%) during their lifetime in the United States; while binge eating disorder rates for women were 3.5% compared to 2% for men in a nationally representative survey.¹ In a sample of 180 female nursing and medical students in Karachi, a prevalence rate of 21.7% was reported for anorexia nervosa.²

The SCOFF questionnaire is a very effective 5-question screening tool for raising suspicion and further assessment for the possibility of eating disorders.³ A cross-sectional survey with convenience sampling was conducted among female university students in the cities of Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Multan, and Mirpur (AJK) to detect eating disorders using SCOFF questionnaire from April to November 2009. Five female graduate students approached students on the campus premises of various universities in the 4 cities, and after obtaining verbal consent distributed the questionnaire and collected the completed ones. Only those students enrolled in masters or higher programs and aged 30 or less were asked to complete the questionnaire. This pre-tested questionnaire included questions on age, and program enrollment, in addition to the five SCOFF questions. One of the SCOFF questions asks about having lost more than one stone weight in a 3 months period; this question was rephrased to read as whether more than 15 pounds or 6 kilograms have been lost. Each SCOFF question answered ‘yes’ is assigned one point; a score of two or higher suggests a likely case of either bulimia or anorexia nervosa. Data were analyzed using the open source free statistical analysis package R version 2.13.0.

Cumulatively 446 students participated in this study. The mean age was 22.5 ± 2.4 years. Four hundred and three (90.4%) students were enrolled in the masters program, while the rest were enrolled in M.Phil program. Table I presents results on the five SCOFF questions. Sixty-nine (15.5%) students responded negatively to all the five SCOFF questions; 70 (15.7%) responded affirmatively to one of the five questions, 110 (24.7%) to two questions, 109 (24.4%) to three questions, 82 (18.4%) to four questions, and 6 (1.3%) to all five questions.

This is the first study in Pakistan to use SCOFF questionnaire. SCOFF is a screening tool for selecting individuals for clinical assessment.³ The 45% affirmative response on the question about believing to be fat even when others think one is too thin suggests dissatisfaction with one’s body shape, and is disturbingly high. In this study, using the recommended cut-off score of 2 or higher indicates that 307 (68.8%) of respondents could have potentially benefitted from and perhaps warranted further clinical assessment. However, owing to the anonymous nature of our preliminary study and conduct in a non-clinical setting precluded that option. Mortality rate of 5% has been reported for anorexia nervosa, and early diagnosis improves the prognosis of eating disorders.⁴,⁵ Our results indicate the need for future studies using SCOFF questionnaire with follow-up clinical assessment to determine the utility of this tool in female graduate student population.

### Table I: SCOFF questionnaire results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you make yourself sick because you feel uncomfortably full?</td>
<td>220 (49.3%)</td>
<td>226 (50.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you worry you have lost control over how much to eat?</td>
<td>202 (45.3%)</td>
<td>244 (54.7%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you recently lost more than fifteen (15) pounds or six (6) kilograms in a 3 months period?</td>
<td>96 (21.5%)</td>
<td>350 (78.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you believe yourself to be fat when others say you are too thin?</td>
<td>201 (45.1%)</td>
<td>245 (54.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you say food dominates your life?</td>
<td>256 (57.4%)</td>
<td>190 (42.6%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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REFERENCES


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