POSTER PRESENTATION

Mental health of the deaf population – a review to an inclusive approach

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Abstract

Introduction: The Deaf population is approximately 70 million worldwide; a large part integrates a community with a unique culture and language, which mental health professionals are not always aware of.

Objectives: The objective of this review is to list the characteristics and difficulties in the approach to mental disorders in deaf individuals.

Methods: The results of this review come from a search of the literature on psychiatric disorders in deaf people and it was conducted on the PubMed platform. Demographic data was consulted in Portuguese Association of the Deaf, World Association of the Deaf and European Union of the Deaf’s websites.

Results: Regarding the psychopathological evaluation of deaf patients, by their particular characteristics, the screening for psychotic symptoms must be open to a wide range of sensory phenomena and it includes the possibility of language deficits resulting from early language deprivation. These language deficits may emerge as a factor for confusion on the assessment of thought organization. For mood evaluation, doctors may observe the speed of the patient’s signing, but also admit other typical mood changes (on sleep, appetite, attention) for a correct diagnosis. Further, the deaf population has the same cluster of depressive symptoms experienced by hearing people. Mood disorders and suicide attempts are estimated as more prevalent in the deaf population; substance use disorders are similar to the general population. However, many methodological problems hamper conclusions on the prevalence of these and other psychiatric diagnoses in deaf patients. This was also verified: a frequent restriction and late access to a spoken or gestual language and its impact on one’s life; a linguistic and cultural barrier between clinicians and deaf patients; the role of certified interpreters that are not always trained to deal with mental health issues; the interpreter’s interference on doctor-patient relationship and on diagnostic interpretation.

Conclusions: No real conclusions can be derived about the expression of psychiatric disorders on the Deaf population, as there are no large scale population-based studies on the subject. Isolation and inequality of the deaf population are perpetuated by the persistence of social and educational deficiencies, including some deficiencies in the psychiatric training of young doctors.

Supplementary material: Complete presentation available at http://ijcnmh.arc-publishing.org

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