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Supporting the future of medicine: Student mental health services in medical school

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Background: Mental health issues are common among United States medical students, and the AAMC has established recommendations for student mental health services provided by medical schools. Few studies directly compare mental health services at medical schools across the United States and, to our knowledge, none analyze how well schools adhere to the established AAMC recommendations.

Objective: To determine whether mental health services at United States medical schools adhere to established guidelines.

Methods: From October 2021 to March 2022, we obtained student handbooks and policy manuals from 77% of the accredited LCME United States medical schools. The AAMC guidelines were operationalized and placed into a rubric format. Each set of handbooks was independently scored against this rubric. A total of 120 handbooks were scored and the results were compiled.

Results: Rates of comprehensive adherence were very low, with only 13.3% of schools displaying adherence to the full set of AAMC guidelines. Partial adherence was higher, with 46.7% of schools meeting at least one of three guidelines. Portions of guidelines whose requirements reflected a standard for LCME accreditation displayed a higher rate of adherence.

Conclusion: The low rates of adherence across medical schools, as measured by handbooks and Policies & Procedures manuals, represents an opportunity to improve the mental health services within United States allopathic schools. An increase in adherence could be a step towards improving the mental health of United States medical students.

KEYWORDS

student mental health and wellness, policy, handbook evaluation, student services, mental health support

Introduction

In recent years, medical schools have sought to foster wellness with encouragement of activities such as mindfulness, exercise, peer connections, healthy diet, and self-care (1). However, mental health is an often overlooked aspect of wellness, despite the higher rates of depression, burnout, and suicidal ideation present in medical students compared to the general population (2, 3). Therefore, it is necessary to ensure students are receiving adequate support and mental health services to best support their patients and themselves. However, there is little research available on the information provided to medical students regarding the availability of mental health services.

Both the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) and the Liaison Committee on Medical Education recognize medical student mental health as a vital aspect of education and suggest the availability of counseling, and the AAMC has a publicly available set of