

# EVALUATION OF FACTORS CAUSING ABSENTEEISM FROM LECTURES IN A MEDICAL COLLEGE

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## ABSTRACT

**OBJECTIVE:** To evaluate the factors causing absenteeism among undergraduate medical students from lectures in a medical college.

**METHODS:** This cross-sectional study was conducted at Aziz Fatimah Medical & Dental College, Faisalabad, Pakistan during the month of July and August 2017. The participants were the medical students of the three batches (third year, fourth year and final year) of the college. There were 308 students, with more than 50% attendance in the last semester. These students were also attending clinical classes. They were asked to fill the Likert's Scale based questionnaire. This study was done to find out the factors which influence the students not to attend the lectures in medical college.

**RESULTS:** Out of 308 medical students in three batches, a total of 267 completed the questionnaire; the response rate was 86.6%. Mean age was  $21.14 \pm 3.4$  years. There were 105 (39.3%) male and 162 (60.6%) female students. The two most common reasons for not attending the lectures were preference of self-studying over attending lectures ( $n = 123$ , 46%) and poor teaching style by lecturers ( $n = 128$ , 47.9%).

**CONCLUSION:** This study proved that the problem of absenteeism is increasing nowadays in medical students. There are multiple factors of absenteeism including bad construction of the lectures and preferring self-study over taking lectures.

**KEY WORDS:** Absenteeism (MeSH); Medical Students (MesH); Lectures (MeSH); Likert Scale (MeSH); Self-study (Non-MeSH).

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## INTRODUCTION

Student absenteeism is one of the most basic indicators of poor individual performance and low level of motivation.<sup>1</sup> The regular attendance in studies is important for the students' educational achievements, professional and social change. Students who attend classes regularly can be successful in their future professional lives through completing work-related skills such as determination, problem-solving, and the ability to work with others to achieve a certain objective.<sup>2</sup> Regular students have better job opportunities.<sup>3,4</sup> As compared to their class-mates, students who don't attend classes regularly have lower academic performance, limited future employment opportunities and

will experience social and emotional complications.<sup>5</sup> Absenteeism not only affects the academic advancement of the student, but also influences the in-class planning of teachers and at the same time the enthusiasm of the other students in the class.<sup>6</sup> Chronic absenteeism has a significant relationship with dangerous behaviors such as substance abuse, violence, physical injury and eventual dropout.<sup>7,8</sup>

Absenteeism is not only a pointer of low academic achievement but also a strong pointer of moderated life success and future.<sup>9</sup> Absenteeism marks it difficult to create a solid base in terms of discipline and sense of responsibility. Therefore, it leads to difficulties in work and discipline behaviors in future work life.<sup>10</sup> This leads

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to low income and inability to work at a regular job.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as absenteeism increases, students are inclined to experience psychological problems such as depression or behavioral disorders such as becoming involved in violence inside and outside of the college, quitting college and acquiring harmful habits.<sup>12</sup> If no measures are taken, absenteeism may be the beginning of a process ranging from academic failure to dropping out of education.

Low attendance in lectures is not a new problem. It has also been identified previously and number of causal factors has been suggested including illness, transport problems, inconvenient lecture times, poor content of lectures and poor teaching techniques. Lectures remain one of the essential methods of teaching in many medical colleges regardless of adaptation of new curriculum. With the increase use of the electronic equipment there is variety of different software which can assist in making lectures more presentable, interesting and interactive, making the traditional teaching more effective. In spite of this advancement low attendance at lectures is still an issue. Absenteeism at higher education level affects the learning process of the students as well as the final result at the end of academic session. There has been a raising concern that it affects the professional socialization also.<sup>2</sup> Lectures and tutorials provide a platform where students interact with the teachers, observe them and distinguish them as examples. Low attendance therefore may disturb this process and deter their professional growth. On the other side the role of teachers in improving student's attendance in lectures cannot

TABLE I: REASONS BEHIND STUDENTS NOT ATTENDING LECTURES

Reasons For Not Attending Lectures	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)
I dont attend lectures as I can download them from the websites.	90 (33.7)	58 (21.8)	119 (44.5)
You feel health related issues have a huge effect on your attendance.	104 (38.9)	62 (23.3)	101 (37.8)
You prefer self/group studying over attending lectures.	123 (46.0)	36 (13.6)	108 (40.4)
You feel that you can pass exams without attending the lectures.	100 (37.4)	32 (12)	135 (50.5)
Lack of subject interest	90 (33.7)	46 (17.3)	131 (49.0)
Poor teaching strategies by lecturers	128 (47.9)	39 (14.7)	100 (37.4)
A desire of different parties and activities with peers	99 (37.0)	41 (15.5)	127 (47.5)
Negative self-image and low self-esteem	33 (12.5)	67 (25)	167 (62.5)
The mental capacity does not match with the medical studies	57 (21.3)	31 (11.7)	179 (67)
Feeling home sick	101 (37.8)	71 (26.7)	95 (35.5)
Attendance at lectures does not affect the achievement of good grades	105 (39.3)	44 (16.6)	118 (44.1)
Even if I dont attend, the lecture notes from peers are enough.	100 (37.4)	34 (12.8)	133 (49.8)

be denied. Good attendance is probably the most important and direct reflection of the student's perception of the effectiveness and usefulness of the lectures delivered. Teachers with well training skills deliver lectures which are structured and scheduled having good communication skills leading to more students' attraction and higher attendance rates. All factors responsible for causing absenteeism in medical colleges are very important to be evaluated and these problems should be solved to increase the attendance rate. The objective of this study was to evaluate the attendance of medical undergraduates studying at various levels in this college and to access the causes of absenteeism in lectures and it will also raise concerns for the educators to fix these factors in order to improve student's attendance in lectures. This will definitely have a positive effect in the professional growth of medical undergraduates.

## METHODS

This cross-sectional study was conducted at Aziz Fatimah Medical & Dental College, Faisalabad, Pakistan during the month of July and August 2017. The participants were the medical students of the three batches (Third year, Fourth Year and Final year) of the college. There were 308 students, with more than 50% attendance in the last semester. These students were also attending clinical classes. They were approached at the end of lectures and asked to fill the questionnaire, which was adapted from Hafeez K, et al. (2014).<sup>13</sup> An informed

consent was taken from the students and the questionnaires were distributed among them in Aziz Fatimah Hospital, Faisalabad, Pakistan. Time was allocated to fill the questionnaire. Data was collected through a questionnaire distributed by one of the researchers. The items developed in the questionnaire refer to some associated previous studies. The questionnaire comprised of two parts, Part A dealt with demographic questions and attendance in last semester and Part B contained different survey questions related to factors that caused students to be absent from lecture. A three-point scale<sup>14</sup> was used to identify student respondents' level of agreement on a statement given. The scale is as follows:

3: Agree; 2: Neutral; 1: Disagree

The quantitative data was analyzed using Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to get descriptive statistics indices and percentages were calculated for each question.

## Ethical Clearance

Ethical clearance was attained from Ethical review board of Aziz Fatimah Medical and Dental College (AFMDC), Faisalabad, Pakistan. We have taken written informed consent from each study participant, and maintained confidentiality by analyzing the data in collection.

## RESULTS

Out of 308 medical students in three batches, a total of 267 completed the questionnaire; the response rate was 86.6%. Mean age was  $21.14 \pm 3.4$  years.

There were 105 (39.3%) male and 162 (60.6%) female students. The 99 respondents were resident of college hostel and 168 were day scholars. The two most common reasons for not attending the lectures were preference of self-studying over attending lectures (n=123, 46%) and poor teaching style by lecturers (n=128, 47.9%).

A total of 44.5 % of the respondents considered that they don't attend lectures as they can download them from websites. On the other hand 38.9% of the students believed that health issues have a huge impact on attendance. Self/group study is preferred over attending lectures by 46%. Majority of the students (50.5%) think that they cannot pass exams without attending the lectures. Lack of interest in a certain subject is another key point 33.7% of the respondents believe in that whereas 49% of the think that lack of interest in a subject is not the reason for not attending the lectures. Some students (47.9%) consider the poor teaching strategies by lecturers. Parties and activities with peers were also nullified by 47.5% of the respondents and also negative self-image and low self-esteem were rejected as reasons by 62.5% of the participants. Majority of the respondents (67%) disagree that mental capacity does not match with the medical studies. Some students (37.8%) claimed that they feel homesickness and thus remain absent, 44.1% of the respondents disagree that the attendance of lectures does not affect the achievement of good grades

whereas 39.3% of the respondents agrees with this. Few students (37.4%) believe even if they don't attend the lectures, the lecture notes from peers are enough (Table I).

## DISCUSSION

Our study reported many reasons for not attending lectures. The two most common reasons for not attending the lectures were giving preference to self-study over attending lectures (46%) and poor teaching style by lectures (47.9%). Lectures are one of the important ways of teaching in most of the universities in traditional system as well as modular system. It must be the ability of the teacher to create interest of all students in a single classroom so that they should not lose their concentration and interest. Poor lectures can leave students uninterested and frustrated rather than encouraging them. The lecturers can connect the lectures' contents to their students' former knowledge and relate it to real life examples, thus making the information more evocative. Teachers should improve lecture presentation strategy to improve the attendance of class. It should include illustrative presentation, adding videos, and question answer sessions to enhance the interest of students in attending lectures. On the other hand, 40.4% students considered lectures as a best source of learning and understanding the difficult topic. According to them, some more hard subjects should be taught completely in the lectures, as the concepts are too difficult for most of the students to understand on their own. Sometimes lecturers made topic so easy, interesting, well organized and understandable within a short period of time, which could have taken hours to understand on their own or in group study. Murphy RJ, et al.<sup>15</sup> recommends that teachers should make an effort to transform their methods of teaching to give students a differing learning style to increase the opportunity of learning in more advantageous environment.

In addition to this there are number of other reasons which affect students' attendance. In our study, 33.7% students agree that they can download uploaded lectures of their teachers from their university website at any time as well as

get information from other resources also. But according to 44.5% students, they agreed that the role of teachers cannot be denied to solve all queries about subject. Nowadays almost all students are equipped with new technology devices such as laptops and smart phones. Digital technologies have heightened the process of learning through the use of digital audio and video recordings that can be circulated across the internet directly to students' desktops.<sup>16</sup>

Health problems are identified as a major contributor to student absenteeism. In our study, 38.9% students reported health related issues as a cause of their absenteeism. Stress related health issues also contribute in their absence. As mentioned by the medical students, vision problem, obesity, tension diarrhea, fever, headache, sore throat and insomnia are some of the health problems. The student who is well nourished, physically active, and well rested is likely to have advantages regarding intellect compared with the adolescent with deficits in any of these areas<sup>17</sup> and will attend classes more regularly as compared to sick student. But 37.8% students think that these problems are not the main cause of absenteeism.

A common hypothesis in higher education is that absenteeism considerably contributed to low academic achievement. The class attendance is a key for improving grade rather than obtaining just pass marks. In our study, 37.4% students feel that they can pass exams without attending the lectures but most of the students (50.5%) think that to pass exams, its essential to hear all lectures very carefully, as most of the examination paper comes from the lecture content. About half (44.1%) students think that its compulsory to attend all lectures to attain good grades but 39.3% students disagree and reported that they can achieve good grades without attending lectures. Dhaliwal<sup>18</sup> reported in his study that absenteeism is associated with poorer marks. Early corrective actions should be taken to prevent failure in examinations. Underachievers should be motivated to improve their performance and to pass the exam in their first attempt, instead of passing their exams at the third or fourth attempt. In many studies it is shown that

good attendance exposed good results and those with poor attendance are at risk of poor performance throughout exams in basic medical sciences.<sup>19</sup>

Our study reported that 33.7% students don't like the subjects of medicine, so they don't attend lectures but 49% students said that this is not the cause of their absenteeism. There is widespread work on the relation between absenteeism and lack of subject material interest, poor teaching policies, ineffective learning environment, and extreme socialization among students, part-time jobs, disease, insomnia, and poor relations with lecturers.<sup>20</sup>

According to our study, 37% students are interested in different types of extra-curricular activities and celebrations of different occasion in college as well as parties with their friends so they remain absent from college and attend those activities. Students who are over-scheduled in too many activities are more tired and irritable and give more attention towards participation of extra-curricular activities instead of attending lectures. But 47.5% students disagree with their point of view and reported that this cannot be the major cause of absenteeism. Those who participate in out-of-school activities often have higher grades, a decrease in absenteeism, and an increased interest to the academics.<sup>21</sup> When balanced with academic learning, extracurricular activities may help students raise self-esteem, feel relaxed and pay more attention toward studies.

It has been proved by many researches that there are many advantages of participating in extracurricular activities including having better grades, higher educational achievement and decreasing absenteeism.<sup>21</sup>

Our study reported that very small number of students (12.3%) remain absent from college because of low self-worth and negative self-image whereas 62.5% students found having high level of self-confidence and are highly motivated to learn medicine. According to Karim JA, et al. (2012)<sup>22</sup> medical students seemed to have poor self-confidence in performing clinical procedures. A support group of family, peers, faculty and a psychologist could be designed to develop their self-esteem and confidence.

Evaluation of medical students' absenteeism showed that the one of the reasons for not attending lectures regularly after choosing field of medicine by the students was doctor's earnings, prestige, transferable skills, giving back to society, international elective and career. According to our study, 21.3% students think that after joining the college they felt that medical subjects are much difficult to understand and their mental capacity does not match with the medical study, that's why they did not attend lectures and have joined medical college to fulfill the great desire of their parents to become a doctor. But the other 67% students like medicine. The medical students who enter this profession are highly motivated, but later develop the attitude of "just learn what is necessary to pass the exam" as they progress through the curriculum.<sup>23</sup>

Some students (37.4%) believe written notes from their friends and class mates are enough, which they have made while attending lectures, to pass the exam but another 49.8% students disagree with them. According to them the ability to take information from lectures and make their own notes by processing it, restructuring it, adding information from references books and then presenting them in examinations and getting higher grades is one of the basic skill and it could be impossible without increasing attendance in lectures. Contrary to these students there is a literature by Grabe (2005), in which he stated that the notes given by teachers can be additional if a student does not attend a lecture or if a student is not accomplished in this task, as note taking is a difficult task that involves concurrently the skills of listening, organizing and writing.<sup>24</sup> By getting these notes, students cannot decrease percentages of absenteeism but improves their grades.

Respondent (37.8%) that also live in hostel students felt homesick which disturbs their mental comfort and they remain absent from lectures. Homesickness, loneliness, stress and nervousness are all common feelings among first-year college students. Victims classically report a combination of depressive and anxious symptoms, withdrawn behavior, and difficulty

focusing on topics unrelated to home.<sup>25,26</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study proved that the problem of absenteeism is increasing nowadays in medical students. There are multiple factors of absenteeism including bad construction of the lectures and preferring self-study over taking lectures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. All stakeholders including teachers, students, administration and parents must focus to minimize absenteeism.
2. The students must be motivated for this noble profession as their competency and professionalism has vital role in saving life of patients.
3. There is need to focus on the contents of the lectures and the lectures should be interactive so as to keep the students involved.

This study will definitely have a positive effect in the professional growth of these medical undergraduates. Training in new teaching methodologies is required to improve the quality of lectures; will ultimately help to increase the percentage of presence in lectures. Further studies are recommended to search for more reasons of absenteeism in medical colleges and to make some strategies to overcome these problems.

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### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Following authors have made substantial contributions to the manuscript as under:

**NAS:** Critical review, final approval of the version to be published

**RH:** Concept & study design, acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data, final approval of the version to be published.

**FH:** Drafting the manuscript, critical review, final approval of the version to be published.

*Authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.*

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declared no conflict of interest

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