Emotional intelligence and academic performance in first and final year medical students: a cross-sectional study

ABSTRACT

Background Research on emotional intelligence (EI) suggests that it is associated with more pro-social behavior, better academic performance and improved empathy towards patients. In medical education and clinical practice, EI has been related to higher academic achievement and improved doctor-patient relationships. This study examined the effect of EI on academic performance in first- and final-year medical students in Malaysia. Methods This was a cross-sectional study using an objectively-scored measure of EI, the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT). Academic performance of medical school students was measured using continuous assessment (CA) and final examination (FE) results. The first- and final-year students were invited to participate during their second semester. Students answered a paper-based demographic questionnaire and completed the online MSCEIT on their own. Relationships between the total MSCEIT score to academic performance were examined using multivariate analyses. Results A total of 163 (84 year one and 79 year five) medical students participated (response rate of 66.0%). The gender and ethnic distribution were representative of the student population. The total EI score was a predictor of good overall CA (OR 1.01), a negative predictor of poor result in overall CA (OR 0.97), a predictor of the good overall FE result (OR 1.07) and was significantly related to the final-year FE marks (adjusted $R^2 = 0.43$). Conclusions Medical students who were more emotionally intelligent performed better in both the continuous assessments and the final professional examination. Therefore, it is possible that emotional skill development may enhance medical students' academic performance.