

War trauma and psychosocial problems: Patient attendees in Jaffna

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Abstract

Objective: To study the types of war related stress and their psychosocial sequelae in those seeking health care in a situation of chronic conflict. **Design:** A random assessment of OPD attendees using a structured questionnaire. **Materials and Methods:** Persons coming for treatment at the Out Patient Department, General Hospital (GH), Jaffna and District Hospital (DH), Tellipallai in February 1991 were chosen to be studied. A random sample of 36 subjects at G.H. Jaffna and 32 at DH Tellipallai attending the OPD on an average day were administered the Stress Impact Questionnaire (SIQ). The SIQ is a structured interview schedule designed from similar trauma questionnaires used elsewhere in the world to detect the stress experienced and resultant psychosocial problems. The stress experienced, somatization and psychosocial symptoms were graded in severity as mild, moderate and severe. A stress score was calculated for each patient. A psychiatric diagnosis was made on those with minor mental health disorders. Appropriate examination, investigation and treatment were carried out. **Results:** The findings revealed considerable similarities in the two populations. The patients tended to be slightly older and belong to the female gender compared to the general population. The majority belonged to the lower socio-economic class. Indirect stresses due to war like displacement (68%), unemployment (55%), economic difficulties (84%), and lack of food (68%), were very common. Of the direct war stressors, 25% had been detained, while 23% had been assaulted and 7% tortured. Thirty percent had experienced direct bombing, shelling, or gunfire. Death of relations and friends (45%) and damage or loss of property (54%) were also frequent stresses. There was considerable somatization (56.9%), usually coexistent with mild organic illness. Forty-two percent had post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Anxiety (47.6%) and Depression (33.3%) were also found. Altogether (81.5%) had identifiable Psychosocial problems. **Conclusions:** There are considerable psychosocial problems in those attending the OPD's. Somatic and psychosocial treatment in the form of counselling, relaxation exercises and referral for economic or rehabilitation assistance will be of immense benefit for the patients; and, in the long term, reduce the workload of the staff and need for drugs.

Author keywords

Help seeking; Out patient department; Psychosocial problems; Somatization; War trauma

Indexed keywords

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