

EATING DISORDERS IN MALTA

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SUMMARY

In the beginning of 2014 a new service (residential and non residential) for eating disorders is being planned to open in Malta. A telephone based survey was conducted between 30 May and 11 June 2012. A randomized sample of 6000 of the population between 15 and 50 years old was chosen. 2.9 per cent of respondents have suffered from an eating disorder at some point in time. 2.0 percent of these had suffered from an eating disorder in the past, while the remaining (0.9 per cent) were suffering from an eating disorder at the time of study. Out of these 2,008 individuals participated in the study. Binge Eating was the most common eating disorder, with 55.8 per cent of respondents having this condition, followed by Anorexia (34.3 per cent) and Bulimia (13.3 per cent). These results were comparable to those of other European countries. Awareness of these conditions in the general population was generally good, higher in females and in those with a higher educational level.

Key words: eating disorders – epidemiology – anorexia – bulimia - binge eating

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INTRODUCTION

Eating disorders are generally described as 'the new epidemic'. They are not the rare diseases they are sometimes believed to be. A recent postal questionnaire was conducted on 1863 Finns aged 20-35 years (Lähteenmäki et al. 2013). The lifetime prevalence of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, eating disorder not otherwise specified and any eating disorder among women were 2.1%, 2.3%, 2.0% and 6.0%, respectively, while there was only one man with an eating disorder. A study conducted in six European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain) (Preti et al. 2009) was conducted between January 2001 and August 2003. Studying a sample 4139 individuals showed that they had a lifetime estimated prevalence of anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, sub-threshold binge eating disorder, and any binge eating were 0.48%, 0.51%, 1.12%, 0.72%, and 2.15%, respectively.

Malta is an archipelago of small islands in the middle of the Mediterranean sea. There have been no scientific studies on the extent of the of the problem of eating disorders in the Maltese Islands. About a year ago, Malta's main charity institution (Malta Community Chest Fund) that is under the auspices of the President of Malta, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, decided to start to provide specialized treatment (residential and non residential) for persons suffering from eating disorders. To decide on the exact amount of service required it was decided that a scientific study is conducted to asses as accurately as possible the extent of the problem in the islands. Thus the Community Chest Fund commissioned the National Office of Statistics of Malta to conduct a national telephone based survey.

METHOD

The telephone survey was aimed to target residents of the islands between the ages of 15 and 50 years and living in private households. Those amounted to 205,417. Out of these a sample of 6,000 individuals was chosen randomly. This method ensured that the sample had the same distribution of the population in terms of gender and sex.

Data was collected by means of telephone interviews between 30 May and 11 June 2012.

The interview consisted of the relevant part of the World Health Organization (WHO) Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CID), which is a fully structured interview that can be used for epidemiological research. An additional section was used to gather information on the local context.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution by age and sex of the sample chosen. Of the individuals selected for the survey, 2,008 participated in the study, yielding a net effective response rate of 53.1 per cent.

Table 2 shows the breakdown of responses for the study.

2.9 per cent of respondents have suffered from an eating disorder at some point in time. 2.0 percent of these had suffered from an eating disorder in the past, while the remaining (0.9 per cent) were suffering from an eating disorder at the time of study. Table 3 shows lifetime history of eating disorders according to age categories.

Females were more likely to suffer or have suffered from an eating disorder (4.7 per cent) compared to their male counterparts (1.2 per cent).

Table 1. Distribution by age and sex of the sample

Age group	Males		Females		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15 - 19	397	6.6%	369	6.1%	766	12.8%
20 - 24	445	7.4%	428	7.1%	872	14.5%
25 - 29	447	7.5%	419	7.0%	867	14.4%
30 - 34	459	7.6%	443	7.4%	902	15.0%
35- 3 9	452	7.5%	427	7.1%	879	14.6%
40 - 44	393	6.5%	378	6.3%	770	12.8%
45 - 50	477	8.0%	467	7.8%	944	15.7%
Total	3,069	51.2%	2,931	48.8%	6,000	100.0%

Table 2. Breakdown of responses for the study

Description	Number	%	% Effective
Accepted	2,008	33.5	53.1
Refused	235	3.9	6.2
No reply (incl. engaged, call backs)	1,542	25.7	40.7
Never contacted	1,570	26.2	-
Ineligible (incl. wrong telephone numbers, does not live at home etc)	645	10.8	-
Total	6000	100.0	100.0

Binge Eating was the most common eating disorder, with 55.8 per cent of respondents having this condition, followed by Anorexia (34.3 per cent) and Bulimia (13.3 per cent). Persons aged 18 to 29 were more likely to suffer from Anorexia than other forms of eating disorders. Conversely, persons aged 30 to 44 were more likely to suffer from Binge Eating.(Table 3).

Table 3. Lifetime history of specific eating disorders

Age Group	Anorexia	Bulimia	Binge Eating
18-29	1.3%	0.6%	0.7%
30-44	1.1%	0.2%	1.9%

Since the study was conducted mainly to provide guidance on the need of services, it was deemed appropriate to ask questions about the respondents' awareness of eating disorders. 77.4 per cent were aware of the existence of eating disorders. Females were more aware than males with 87.2 per cent compared to 68.0 per cent. Education level also appears to be related to awareness, where 45.7 per cent of those who have attained no formal education or a pre-primary level of education did not know about eating disorders compared to a minority of 3.2 per cent for respondents who have attained a tertiary level of education. 52.1 per cent believed that persons are not very well informed on eating disorders. The proportion of females (25.8 per cent) who knew someone suffering from an eating disorder at the time of study or who had suffered from an eating disorder was higher than that of males (18.9 per cent).

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DISCUSSION

The presence of eating disorders in Malta are comparable to those found in other European countries (Preti et al. 2009). There is good awareness of these conditions within the general population. But this needs to be improved especially in the less educated class.

The results of this study are being used to decide on the extent of the services required for these conditions in Malta, which services it is planned that will start to be functional in the beginning of 2014.

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References

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