

Knowledge, perceptions and attitudes of university students regarding COVID-19, Cyprus

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Background:

University students represent an active group with important implications in the novel coronavirus transmission. Elucidating their knowledge, attitudes and perceptions was important for customizing communication material and other information activities.

Methods:

The cross-sectional online INTERACT survey targeted students in conventional programs in the five main Universities in the Cyprus Republic between 17-31 March 2020, a week either side of the first national lockdown (24 March).

Results:

A total of 3641 students completed the survey (19% response rate): 65.5% female, 80.9% Bachelor, 41% Health/Life sciences. Amongst participants, 68.8% and 20.6% responded correctly to at least six and eight of 10 knowledge-related questions. Objective knowledge did not vary substantially according to self-evaluation of knowledge. Misconceptions were identified in 25-30%. Only 29.1% expressed positive attitude towards a hypothetical person with COVID-19 without also projecting judgement or blame. Odds of expressing positive attitude increased by 18% (95%CI 13-24%) per unit increase in knowledge. Studying at postgraduate level was predictive of better knowledge (OR of \geq score8 1.81; 95%CI 1.34-2.46) and positive attitude (OR 1.35; 95%CI 1.01-1.80). With average knowledge score 6.4 (SD 1.6) vs 6.1 (SD 1.6), Health/Life Sciences students performed marginally better, but were not any more likely to express positive attitude.

Conclusions:

Although Cypriot University students appeared relatively knowledgeable, there were specific gaps and misconceptions, some of which may be attributed to changes in information provided to the public. Attitudes should also be interpreted in the local context where reporting, though seemingly neutral, was not characterised by empathy towards people affected. Findings highlight the importance of continuous and good communication, especially as guidance changes, both in terms of content as well as effect.

Key messages:

- Misconceptions and negative attitudes related to COVID19 were identified among Cypriot University students, including those in Health Sciences.
- Good quality communication is important both in terms of content as well as its effect on shaping attitudes.