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Author(s)	Casey, Rachel; O'Doherty, Julia; Murphy, Kevin D.; Sahm, Laura J.
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Perceived stress experienced by undergraduate healthcare professional students throughout their degree.

R. Casey [1], J. O'Doherty [1], K.D. Murphy, [1] L.J. Sahm [1-2]

[1]Pharmaceutical Care Research Group, School of Pharmacy, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland
[2] Department of Pharmacy, Mercy University Hospital, Grenville Place, Cork, Ireland.

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

- There is evidence of high levels of perceived stress among students studying healthcare courses. [1, 2, 3, 4] Stress can be positive in stimulating optimum performance. However, excessive stress leads to distress which is correlated with decreased health related quality of life [5]. Ignoring this issue will continue to hinder student learning and produce burnt out, anxious healthcare professionals.
- A literature review conducted as part of this study found academic, personal and financial factors to be sources of stress among students - academic factors having greatest significance. [1,2,3,4,5]
- The aims of this study are to:
  - Determine perceived stress levels among undergraduate healthcare students; comparing courses and gender.
  - Investigate the academic factors that contribute to this stress and characterise the relevant importance of each stressor using frequencies and a 5 point rating scale (1=little stress and 5=extremely stressful).

METHODS

- This was a cross sectional web-based, survey conducted among undergraduate healthcare students in UCC. All students in the College of Medicine and Health, excluding first years were invited to participate in the study.
- Data was collected using LimeSurvey software and analysed with IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26 and Microsoft Excel.
- A web-based survey design consisting of four sections was sent to healthcare students; **section 1** collected demographic information on gender, course and year group, **section 2** consisted of the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) [5] - scores range from 0 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher levels of perceived stress, **section 3** focused on academic factors that may cause stress and **section 4** was a free response question inviting students to describe the nature of their stress.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by course

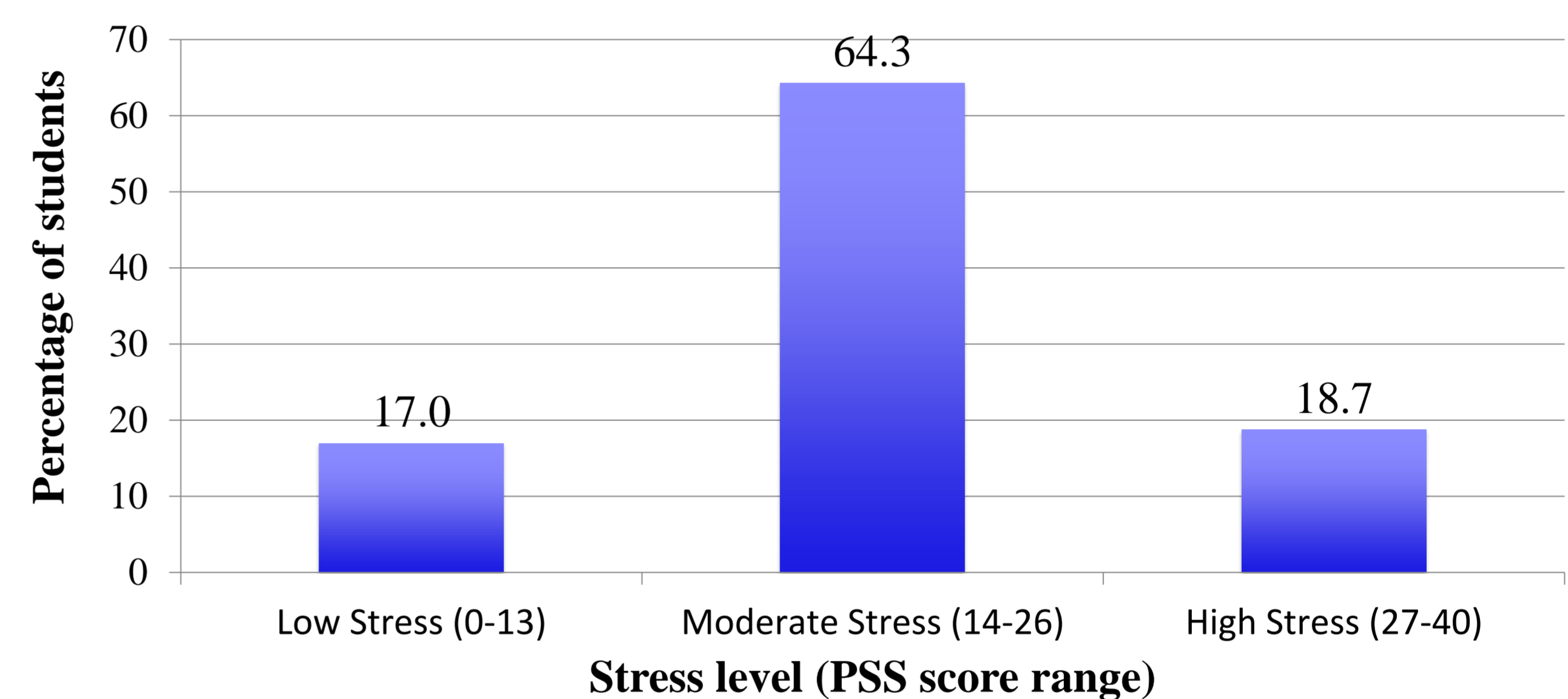| Healthcare course	No. of respondents
General Nursing	40
Pharmacy	40
Medicine	28
Dentistry	24
Public Health	18
Intellectual Disability and Children's Nursing	18
Occupational Therapy	15
Speech and Language Therapy	13
Mental Health Nursing	9

Figure 1. Level of stress by PSS category experienced by healthcare students

- There were 205 responses in total (Table 1). There were fewer male (11.6%) than female respondents (88.4%). This is representative of the gender split in healthcare courses. The majority of students experienced moderate stress with approximately 1-in-6 experiencing high stress (Figure 1).
- The mean PSS score for female students is 21.5 and for male students is 20.1. This is in line with other studies conducted in the area. [5, 6, 7, 8, 9]
- The course reporting the highest mean PSS was Dentistry (24.1), followed by Nursing (22.8), Public Health (22.4), Occupational Therapy (20.8) and Pharmacy (20.7).

3. Academic Stress Factors: Analysis of frequencies and ranking on a 5 point scale revealed the top 4 academic stress factors to be; end of module exams, academic workload, oral presentations and continuous assessments.

4. Free Response Section: Students commented on the negative impact this stress is having on their physical health, mental health and academic performance. Stress experienced during healthcare courses has left many students feeling "burnout", "anxious" and sad". In an attempt to put in the hours necessary to "get through" the course, students often find themselves cutting out exercise, skipping social events and eating a lot of convenience food - all of which further leads to a decreased health related quality of life.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- This study, is anticipated to help the College of Medicine and Health to better understand stress levels among its student cohort. It may aid faculty members in identifying interventions that need to be put in place to reduce this stress. If results merit it, school administrators may be inclined to consider altering the curriculum along with the teaching and learning methods in order to address this issue.
- This study adds to the research carried out in the School of Pharmacy by Dr. Michelle O' Driscoll. Dr. O' Driscoll's study [10] examined student experiences of the pharmacy degree and the role of mindfulness.
- Future research should investigate the benefit of various interventions in reducing academic stress among students.

References available on request