

## Original Research Article

# Knowledge and attitude related to medical ethics among medical students

Iswarya S.<sup>1\*</sup>, Bhuvaneshwari S.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Community Medicine, Government Medical College and ESI Hospital, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of Pharmacology, PSG Institute of Medical Science & Research, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

**Received:** 24 March 2018

**Revised:** 11 May 2018

**Accepted:** 12 May 2018

### \*Correspondence:

Dr. Iswarya S,

E-mail: [ishwarya3386@gmail.com](mailto:ishwarya3386@gmail.com)

**Copyright:** © the author(s), publisher and licensee Medip Academy. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License, which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** There has been growing public awareness regarding the ethical conduct of medical practitioners, and complaints against physicians appear to be escalating. After completing their studies, healthcare professionals are expected to know ethical principles and apply them in their clinical practice. Hence, this study was conducted to assess the knowledge and attitude of medical ethics among final year medical students.

**Methods:** Cross sectional study was conducted among final year Medical students in a private medical college. After obtaining permission from Institutional ethics committee, the purpose of the study and nature of information which has to be furnished from the students was explained to them. Willingness to participate in the study was obtained from participants using written consent form. Data was collected among 135 medical students using pre tested self-administered questionnaire. The respondents were asked to grade their responses on a 3 point Likert scale.

**Results:** Study results showed majority 87% of students felt patient wishes must always be adhered to. In contrast 65% of students felt doctors must do what is best irrespective of patient's opinion. About 64.7% of them disagreed consent is required only in case of operations and not for tests and medications. Nearly half (47%) of the students were of opinion privacy of the patient must not be ignored for benefit of larger group.

**Conclusions:** The fact that many respondents had neutral opinion to some questions may indicate their lack of awareness or knowledge in that area and their inability to decide. Hence there should be sufficient training classes, workshops, conferences to stress the importance of ethical practice.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Medical ethics, Attitude

## INTRODUCTION

Ethics is the study of morality – careful and systematic analysis of moral decisions and behaviors and practicing those decisions. Medical ethics is concerned with moral values and judgment as it applies to medicine.<sup>1</sup> Goal of ethics education is to enable students to identify difficult situations and deal with them in a rational and principled manner. Ethics education aims to help medical students understand moral principles and analyse and define their own values.

Medical practice throughout the world has become increasingly commercialized, and ethics has taken a backseat. Advances in medical science have increased ethical issues related to Health care. There has been growing public awareness regarding the ethical conduct of medical practitioners, and complaints against physicians appear to be escalating.<sup>2</sup> This increase in litigation against doctors is issue of immediate concern. How doctors are trained, is regarded as a key element in determining the ethical and legal conduct within the healthcare sector. However, on qualifying, healthcare

professionals are expected to know about ethical practice during application of their skills.

Training in medical ethics has been made mandatory in the undergraduate curriculum by the regulatory body of medical education, the Medical Council of India (MCI). Medical Council of India in 2002 released its code of ethics which was a regulatory document on professional conduct, etiquette, and ethics of doctors.<sup>3</sup> Dearth's of specialists in bioethics and a lack of organized human resources have led to lack of appreciation of the urgent need to include bioethics in medical education in India.

The first step in formulating an ethics curriculum may be to determine the level of the basic knowledge and attitudes of the medical students. Hence, this study was planned to assess the knowledge and attitude of medical ethics among undergraduates who are future of the society to practice the art of cure.

## METHODS

This cross sectional study was carried among final year medical students in PSG Institute of Medical Sciences & Research, Coimbatore during July 2016. After obtaining permission from Institutional ethics committee, the purpose of the study and nature of information which has

to be furnished from the students was explained to them. Willingness to participate in the study was obtained from participants using written consent form. Those who are on leave, refused to participate were excluded from the study. Data was collected among 135 students using a self-administered questionnaire. It was ensured that respondents understood the meaning of questions as well. Questionnaire included demographic details and 14 questions on everyday ethical issues. They were asked if they agreed or disagreed with certain statements concerning ethical conduct, autonomy, paternalism, confidentiality, informing patients about wrongdoing and informing relatives about the patient's condition, informed consent. The respondents were asked to grade their responses on a 3 point Likert scale, where the possible responses are agree, no opinion, or disagree. Collected data was entered in Excel and results were expressed in proportions.

## RESULTS

Out of 140 final year students 135 students participated in the study. In this study 56% of participants were female and 44% were males. The mean age group of participants was 22 years.

Table 1 describes student's knowledge and attitude regarding medical ethics.

**Table 1: Distribution of students according to knowledge and attitude in medical ethics.**

Issues in medical ethics	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
<b>Patient should always be informed of wrong doing by anyone involved in his/her treatment</b>	99 (73.5)	25 (18.6)	11 (7.8)
<b>Patients' wishes should always be adhered to</b>	117 (87.2)	10 (7.8)	8 (5.6)
<b>The doctor should do what is best irrespective of the patient's opinion</b>	87 (64.7)	25 (18.6)	23 (16.6)
<b>Confidentiality cannot be maintained in modern care</b>	33 (24.5)	40 (29.4)	62 (46)
<b>Close relatives must always be told about the patient's condition</b>	83 (61.7)	25 (18.4)	27 (19.6)
<b>Consent is required only in case of operations and not for tests and medications</b>	30 (22.5)	18 (12.7)	87 (64.7)
<b>Certain medical practitioners charging more from rich patients to compensate for treating the poor is a good practice</b>	49 (36.2)	38 (28.4)	48 (35.2)
<b>Ethical conduct is important only for avoiding legal action</b>	41 (30.3)	25 (18.6)	69 (50.9)
<b>During clinical rounds along with clinical aspects of a patient's care, it is also essential to discuss ethical issues of that patient</b>	97 (71.5)	25 (18.6)	13 (9.8)
<b>Privacy of one patient may be ignored for the benefit of the larger group</b>	44 (32.3)	28 (20.5)	63 (47)
<b>Children (except in emergency) should never be treated without the consent of their parents or guardian</b>	99 (73.5)	16 (11.7)	20 (14.7)
<b>If law allows abortion, doctors must not refuse to do abortion</b>	91 (67.6)	30 (22.5)	14 (9.8)
<b>In one's practice it is better to use the brand name than the generic name of a drug</b>	54 (40.1)	40 (29.4)	41 (30.3)
<b>Clinically confirmed cases should also undergo laboratory investigations as a routine</b>	89 (65.6)	18 (13.7)	28 (20.5)

Most (73%) of the students felt patients must always be informed about wrong doing by anyone involved in his/her treatment and only 7.8% of students disagreed with the statement. Though majority 87% of them agreed that patient wishes must be adhered on the other hand 65% of students felt doctor should do what is best irrespective of the patient's opinion. Around 46% of them disagreed for the statement confidentiality cannot be maintained in modern care and 29% of the students were of neutral opinion. Nearly 64.7% of them disagreed consent is required only in case of operations and not for tests and medications. Only 36% of them disagreed certain medical practitioners charging more from rich patients to compensate for treating the poor is a good practice and 28% of the students were uncertain about this. 30% agreed and 18% were uncertain as to whether Ethical conduct is important only to avoid legal action and 50% disagreed with the statement. Majority (71%) of the students agreed that ethical issues of patient care must also be discussed during clinical rounds. Nearly half (47%) of the students were of opinion privacy of the patient must not be ignored for benefit of larger group and 20% of them were uncertain about this. Majority of students (71%) agreed that children should never be treated without the consent of their parents or guardian except in case of emergency. Only 30% of students disagreed the statement it's better to use brand name rather than generic name of drug in one's practice and 29.4% of students were uncertain about this. Most of them (65%) of them felt clinically confirmed case must undergo laboratory investigation as a routine.

## DISCUSSION

In our study majority 73% of students agreed that patient should always be informed of wrong doing by anyone involved in his/her treatment which is similar to study by Angadi et al 78% but lesser compared to study by Mohammed et al 83%.<sup>4,5</sup> This difference could be due to study conducted by Mohammed et al was among practicing physicians.<sup>5</sup> Study conducted in Cochin reported 80% of medical postgraduates agreed for the same.<sup>5,6</sup> In study conducted in Manipur only 32% of doctors agreed that patient should always be informed about wrong doing by doctors.<sup>7</sup> A Multicentre study reported only 38% agreed patients must be informed about the wrong doing.<sup>2</sup>

Students often expressed contradictory views in different areas of ethical issues e.g. while dealing with treatment of patients, most students(87%) agreed to adhering to "patient's wishes", on the other hand nearly 65% of the students felt that "doctor should do what is best" irrespective of patients opinion. Similar to study conducted by Chatterjee in West Bengal.<sup>8</sup> In Another study conducted in Chennai, 87% of physicians reported they consider patients opinion before taking any major treatment decisions however 81% of them reported they do best for patients irrespective of their opinion.<sup>9</sup> Study in

Karnataka reported around 62% of respondents would always adhere to patients wishes in course of treatment.<sup>4</sup>

In the present study 46% of students disagreed confidentiality cannot be maintained in modern care & 29% of them were uncertain. In study conducted among medical postgraduates in Cochin reported 91% of them disagreed for the statement confidentiality cannot be maintained.<sup>6</sup> In another study 94% of interns disagreed for the above statement.<sup>10</sup>

In the present study 61.7% agreed close relatives must always be informed about the patient's condition. Study conducted among government physicians in Chennai reported 76.4% agreed for the above statement.<sup>9</sup> In study conducted among doctors in teaching hospital at Manipur showed 89% of them felt patients close relatives must always be informed about patient's condition.<sup>7</sup>

In our study 64.7% disagreed consent is necessary only for operations and not for medications and laboratory test and 12.7% of them were uncertain. In the study by Janakiraman among medical post graduate students in South India reported 83% disagreed as consent is required only for surgical procedures.<sup>6</sup> In a study conducted in Chennai among health care providers at government hospital reported only 12% of physicians obtained consent before doing any investigation.<sup>10</sup>

Fifty percentage of students disagree that ethical conduct is important only to avoid legal actions similar to multi centric study conducted among physicians.<sup>9</sup> In a study conducted in Karnataka among medical students reported 63% of students were uncertain and 22.8% of students agreed to ethical conduct is important only to avoid legal action.<sup>4</sup> In the study conducted among medical postgraduates in Cochin reported 85% of them disagreed that ethical conduct is important only to avoid legal action.<sup>6</sup>

Majority of students (71%) felt ethical aspects related to patients care must be discussed during clinical rounds similar to study (68%) by Chatterjee et al conducted among medical students.<sup>8</sup> In the present study 73% of students agreed children's should not be treated without parents' consent. In the study conducted in Manipur 65% of doctors agreed with this statement. Another study conducted among medical graduates reported 68% agreed children's should be treated only with parents' consent.<sup>11</sup>

Only (10%) of students disagreed if law allows abortion doctors must not refuse to do abortion similar to a study conducted by Subramanian et al which reported only 15% of physicians in disagreed.<sup>9</sup> This could be due to students in our study is not sure about the rights of a doctor. In another study in Manipur 60% of doctors disagreed to the statement doctors must not refuse to do abortion when law allows.<sup>7</sup> Similarly another multi centric study conducted among doctors and nurses from North India reported 63% of them reported doctors can refuse to do

abortions.<sup>2</sup> 83% of physicians disagreed in the study conducted among doctors and nurses.<sup>12</sup>

In the present study 40% felt it is better to use brand name rather than generic name during giving prescription to patients and 30% of them didn't have any opinion. Similar to study among medical undergraduate students in Karnataka.<sup>4</sup> In a study conducted in West Bengal 59% reported it's better to prescribe generic drug rather than brand name.<sup>8</sup>

In our study (65%) of students felt clinically confirmed cases should also undergo laboratory investigations as a routine similar to study done among health care professionals.<sup>4</sup>

In the present study 35% of students disagreed that certain medical practitioners charging more from rich patients to compensate for treating poor patients is a good practice, 28% of students were not certain about such practice. Study conducted among medical interns 43% disagreed and 30% of them were not sure about it.<sup>13</sup> In the study among medical postgraduates in Cochin 75% of them did not agree this as a good practice.

## CONCLUSION

This study findings indicate a gap exist in knowledge about practical aspects of health care among students. Contradictory views in different areas of ethical issues like dealing with treatment of patients and adhering to patient wishes exist. The fact that many respondents had neutral opinion to some questions may indicate their lack of awareness or knowledge in that area and their inability to decide. Hence there should be sufficient training classes, workshops, conferences to stress the importance of ethical practice and to make the students confident enough to deal the ethical dilemma.

*Funding: No funding sources*

*Conflict of interest: None declared*

*Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee*

## REFERENCES

1. Baldwin DC, Dughtery SR, Rowley BD. Unethical and Unprofessional conduct observed by residents during their first year of training. Acad Med. 1998;73:1195-200.
2. Chopra M, Bharadwaj A, Mitha P, Sign A, Siddiqui A, Rajesh PR. Current status of Knowledge, Attitude and Practices towards Healthcare Ethics among Doctors and Nurses from North India-A Multicenter Study. JKIMSU. 2013;2:102-7.
3. MCI. Indian Medical Council. Professional Conduct, Etiquette and Ethics Regulations, 2002. Gazette of India. 2002;Part-III-Sec-4.
4. Angadi MM, Shashank KJ, Jose AP. A study to assess knowledge regarding medical ethics among undergraduates in Shri B M Patil Medical college, Bijapur, Karnataka. Int J Pharm Bio Sci. 2014;5(1):647-53.
5. Mohammed AM, Ghanem MA, Kassem A. Knowledge, perceptions and practices towards medical ethics among physician residents of University of Alexandria hospitals, Egypt. East Mediterr Health J. 2012;18(9):935-45.
6. Janakiram C, Gardens SJ. Knowledge, attitudes and practices related to healthcare ethics among medical and dental postgraduate students in south India. Indian J Med Ethic. 2014;2:100-3.
7. Borgen SA, Rajkumari B, Laisharam J, Joy A. Knowledge and Attitude of Doctors on Medical Ethics in Teaching Hospital Manipur. Ind J Med Ethic. 2009;6:194-7.
8. Chatterjee B, Sarkar J. Awareness of medical ethics among undergraduates in a West Bengal medical college. Indian J Med Ethic. 2012;9(2):93-9.
9. Subramanian T, Mathai AK, Kumar N. Knowledge and practice of clinical ethics among healthcare providers in a government hospital, Chennai. Indian J Med Ethic. 2013;2:96-100.
10. Rabbani MW, Mujtaba M, Naeem F, Ullah E. Knowledge and awareness of Medical ethics among medical graduates from two medical colleges in Lahore, Pakistan. Rawala Med J. 2014;39(3):341-3.
11. Imran N, Haider II, Jawaid M, Mazhar N. Health Ethics Education: Knowledge, attitudes and practice of healthcare ethics among interns and residents in Pakistan. J Post Med Inst. 2014;28(4):383-9.
12. Hariharan S, Jonnalagadda R, Walrond E, Moseley H. Knowledge, attitudes and practice of healthcare ethics and law among doctors and nurses in Barbados. BMC Med Ethics. 2006;7(7):1-9.
13. Acharya RP, Shakya YL. Knowledge, attitude and practice of medical ethics among medical intern students in a Medical College in Kathmandu. Bangladesh J Bioethics 2015;6(3):1-9.

**Cite this article as:** Iswarya S, Bhuvaneshwari S. Knowledge and attitude related to medical ethics among medical students. Int J Community Med Public Health 2018;5:2222-5.