**TITLE: ATTITUDE OF HEALTH CARE PERSONNEL TOWARDS ETHICS**

**Abstract:**

Ethics in healthcare is not routinely taught to dental professionals though they are expected to know about it during practice. Hence this study was conducted to compare the attitude of study subjects in the field of medicine and dentistry towards ethics. A cross sectional study using questionnaire was conducted among 87 Medical and Dental Professionals. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version-17. The influence of gender and occupation was analyzed by Chi square test. Among the study subjects 56.8% of the Medical and 32.6% of dental professionals agreed that patient’s wishes should always be adhered and there was a significant difference between them (p=0.001). Among them 50% of males and 42.9% of females disagreed to the abandoning of confidentiality in modern care and a significant difference was found (p = 0.036). Issues related to ethics showed varying opinions among health professionals.

**Key words**: Attitude; Healthcare Personnel; Ethics

**Introduction:**

There is growing public awareness regarding the ethical conduct of medical practitioners, and complaints against physicians appear to be escalating. The changing doctor-patient relationship and commercialization of modern medical practice has affected the practice of medicine.(1)The confidentiality and privacy of patient data are very important parts of the physician-patient relationship(2)and are fundamental principles of ethics in the practice of medicine.(3) Caregivers obtain sensitive personal information from patients to understand their medical or dental problems, and such information is considered confidential, indicating that those who possess the information have a responsibility to protect it from disclosure to others who are not entitled to this information.(4) Confidentiality is the right of an individual or confidentiality is the basis of trust.

Ethics in Healthcare practice is not routinely taught to the medical professionals, and it has been completely ignored during the undergraduate medical or dental curriculum. At their final stage of Graduation Ceremony, the Graduated take an Hippocratic Oath on Professional Conduct. But the issue raises the question regarding the competence of the professionals regarding the ethical issues related to patient care. However, on qualifying, healthcare professionals are expected to know about ethical practice during application of their skills. Doctors have several ethical, moral and legal obligations in their duties. It is therefore very important that every doctor understands the nature of these obligations and then fulfills these obligations to the best of their ability. (3)

There are many recommendations to strategize the teachings of medical ethics, most of it emphasizing the importance of tailoring it to the needs of the particular society in which it would be relevant.(5)Traditional medical training offers little help in resolving the ethical dilemmas encountered by healthcare professionals.(6) In order to formulate an ethical curriculum to every region, the first step may be to determine the current basic knowledge and attitudes of the healthcare practitioners in the region.Hence, an attempt is made here to assess the attitude of healthcare personnel towards ethics.

**Objectives of the study:**

1. To assess the attitude of study subjects in the field of medicine and dentistry towards ethics.
2. To compare the attitude of study subjects in the field of medicine and dentistry towards ethics.

**Methodology:**

The research protocol was submitted to A.J. Ethical Review Committee, and the study was approved. A pilot study was conducted to check for reliability of the questionnaire. Twenty randomly selected professionals were asked to complete the questionnaire at different time intervals. Cronbach’s alpha test result showed the value as 0.82.The questionnaire was obtained from a study conducted by Hariharan S et al. (5) A Cross-sectional Study was conducted among the Medical and Dental Professionals of a Tertiary Care Hospital. A total of 87 study subjects were part of the study. The subjects were selected based on Convenience sampling. The study protocol was explained to them and after obtaining informed consent the questionnaire was administered. The structured questionnaire included twelve closed ended questions to evaluate the attitude of healthcare personnel towards ethics. The questionnaire was designed to examine the respondent's decision-making process in relation to ethical issues and to identify the healthcare practitioner's values and beliefs towards ethics. The initial part of the questionnaire collected data on demographics such as age, gender and occupation.

The respondents had to choose one answer from the alternatives proposed under each question in a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5: 1- strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-not sure, 4-agree and 5-srongly agree. The respondents were divided into two groups namely Medical and Dental professionals for the sake of analysis. The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version-17 software. The influence of gender and occupation on the responses was analyzed by Chi square test. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

**Results:**

A questionnaire based study was conducted among medical and dental professionals working in a tertiary care hospital of Mangalore city. The questionnaire was distributed among 44 medical and 43 dental professionals (Table-1). Among the Medical professionals 40.9% were males and 59.1% were females and among the dental professionals 46.5% were males and 53.5% were females.

The influence of occupation in the practice of ethics is shown in Table-2. Among the study subjects 56.8% of the Medical and 32.6% of dental professionals agreed that patient’s wishes should always be adhered. There was a statistical significant difference between the two groups (p=0.001). Among the respondents 29.5% of the Medical professionals and 27.9% of the dental Professionals disagreed to the Paternalistic view that doctor should do what is best irrespective of patient’s opinion. In the present study 61.4% of the Medical Professionals and 39.5% of the Dental Professionals agreed that close relatives must always be told about a patient’s condition and the difference was statistically significant (p=0.014). Among the study subjects 79.5% of the Medical and 48.8% of the dental professionals disagreed to the view that patient’s only need to consent for operations but not for tests or medications. The results showed that there was a statistical significant difference (p=0.005). Among the study subjects 47.7% and 58.1% of the Medical and Dental Professionals strongly agreed that the children should never be treated without the consent of their parents. Regarding violent patients 54.5% of Medical and 39.5% of dental professionals refused to treat patients who behave violently. Among the respondents 31.8% of Medical professionals disagreed to the view that if the law allows abortion to be performed, a health care worker cannot refuse to do an abortion. Among the study subjects 31.8% and 23.3% of the Medical and Dental professionals disagreed that if a patient wishes to die, he or she should be assisted in doing so.

Table-3 shows the influence of gender in the practice of care ethics. In response to the importance of ethical conduct in healthcare 31.6% and 28.6% of males and females disagreed to the concept that ethical conduct is required only for ethical conduct. Among the respondents 31.6% and 26.5% of the males and females disagreed to the fact that doctor should do best irrespective of patient’s opinion. Among the study subjects 50% of males and 42.9% of females disagreed to the abandoning of confidentiality in modern care and a statistical significant difference was found (p = 0.036). Among the study subjects, 28.9% and 38.8% of the males and females disagreed that if a patient wishes to die, he or she should be assisted in doing so. Among the respondents 26.3% and 14.3% of the males and females agreed that if a patient refuses treatment due to beliefs they should be instructed to find another doctor.

**Tables**

**Table 1: Distribution of the respondents based on Gender and Occupation**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **GENDER** | | Total  n (%) |
| **OCCUPATION** | **MALES**  n (%) | **FEMALES**  n (%) |
| MEDICAL | 18 (40.9%) | 26  (59.1%) | 44  (100%) |
| DENTAL | 20 (46.5%) | 23  (53.5%) | 43  (100%) |

**Table 2: Influence of Occupation in the Practice of ethics**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issues in Practice of Medical ethics** | **OCCUPATION** | **STRONGLY DISAGREE** | **DISAGREE** | **NOT SURE** | **AGREE** | **STRONGLY AGREE** | **‘p’ value** |
| Ethical conduct is important only to avoid legal action | MEDICAL | 11(25.0%) | 12(27.3%) | 10(22.7%) | 9(20.5%) | 2(4.5%) | 0.086 |
| DENTAL | 12(27.9%) | 14(32.6%) | 3(7.0%) | 6(14.0%) | 8(18.6%) |
| Patient’s wishes must always be adhered to | MEDICAL | 0(0%) | 14(31.8%) | 2(4.5%) | 25(56.8%) | 3(6.8%) | **0.001** |
| DENTAL | 5(11.6%) | 6(13.9%) | 4(9.3%) | 14(32.6%) | 14(32.6%) |
| Doctors should do what is best irrespective of patients opinion | MEDICAL | 2(4.5%) | 13(29.5%) | 10(22.7%) | 11(25.0%) | 8(18.2%) | 0.084 |
| DENTAL | 10(23.3%) | 12(27.9%) | 4(9.3%) | 11(25.6%) | 6(14.0%) |
| Patient should always be told if something is wrong | MEDICAL | 2(4.5%) | 6(13.6%) | 1(2.3%) | 19(43.2%) | 16(36.4%) | 0.061 |
| DENTAL | 4(9.3%) | 0(.0%) | 1(2.3%) | 14(32.6%) | 24(55.8%) |
| Confidentiality cannot be kept in modern care and should be abandoned | MEDICAL | 12(27.3%) | 25(56.8%) | 6(13.6%) | 1(2.3%) | 0(.0%) | 0.154 |
| DENTAL | 17(39.5%) | 15(34.9%) | 6(14.0%) | 2(4.7%) | 3(7.0%) |
| Close relatives must always be told about a patient’s condition | MEDICAL | 6(13.6%) | 5(11.4%) | 6(13.6%) | 27(61.4%) | 0(.0%) | **0.014** |
| DENTAL | 7(16.3%) | 4(9.3%) | 5(11.6%) | 17(39.5%) | 10(23.3%) |
| Patients only need to consent for operations but not for tests or medication | MEDICAL | 2(4.5%) | 35(79.5%) | 3(6.8%) | 2(4.5%) | 2(4.5%) | **0.005** |
| DENTAL | 13(30.2%) | 21(48.8%) | 5(11.6%) | 4(9.3%) | 0(.0%) |
| Children should never be treated without the consent of their parents or guardians | MEDICAL | 4(9.1%) | 1(2.3%) | 5(11.4%) | 13(29.5%) | 21(47.7%) | 0.113 |
| DENTAL | 6(14.0%) | 3(7.0%) | 0(.0%) | 9(20.9%) | 25(58.1%) |
| Doctors and nurses should refuse to treat patients who behave violently | MEDICAL | 2(4.5%) | 24(54.5%) | 8(18.2%) | 2(4.5%) | 8(18.2%) | 0.074 |
| DENTAL | 10(23.3%) | 17(39.5%) | 8(18.6%) | 4(9.3%) | 4(9.3%) |
| If patients refuse treatment due to beliefs, they should be instructed to find another doctor | MEDICAL | 4(9.1%) | 14(31.8%) | 11(25.0%) | 11(25.0%) | 4(9.1%) | 0.782 |
| DENTAL | 5(11.6%) | 16(37.2%) | 12(27.9%) | 6(14.0%) | 4(9.3%) |
| The law allows abortion to be performed , therefore a health worker cannot refuse to do an abortion | MEDICAL | 5(11.4%) | 14(31.8%) | 9(20.5%) | 12(27.3%) | 4(9.1%) | 0.891 |
| DENTAL | 4(9.3%) | 10(23.3%) | 11(25.6%) | 13(30.2%) | 5(11.6%) |
| Patient who wishes to die should be assisted in doing so | MEDICAL | 3(6.8%) | 18(40.9%) | 14(31.8%) | 7(15.9%) | 2(4.5%) | 0.558 |
| DENTAL | 7(16.3%) | 12(27.9%) | 16(37.2%) | 6(14.0%) | 2(4.7%) |

**Table 3: Influence of Gender in the Practice of ethics**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Issues in Practice of Medical ethics** | **Gender** | **STRONGLY DISAGREE** | **DISAGREE** | **NOT SURE** | **AGREE** | **STRONGLY AGREE** | **‘p’ value** |
| Ethical conduct is important only to avoid legal action | MALE | 8(21.1%) | 12(31.6%) | 8(21.1%) | 7(18.4%) | 3(7.9%) | 0.508 |
| FEMALE | 15 (30.6%) | 14(28.6%) | 5(10.2%) | 8 (16.3%) | 7(14.3%) |
| Patient’s wishes must always be adhered to | MALE | 4 (10.5%) | 6(15.8%) | 4(10.5%) | 15(39.5%) | 9(23.7%) | 0.228 |
| FEMALE | 1(2.0%) | 14(28.5%) | 2(4.1%) | 24(49.0%) | 8(16.3%) |
| Doctors should do what is best irrespective of patients opinion | MALE | 5(13.2%) | 12(31.6%) | 5(13.2%) | 8(21.1%) | 8(21.1%) | 0.721 |
| FEMALE | 7(14.3%) | 13(26.5%) | 9(18.4%) | 14(28.6%) | 6(12.2%) |
| Patient should always be told if something is wrong | MALE | 5(13.2%) | 2(5.3%) | 1(2.6%) | 14(36.8%) | 16(42.1%) | 0.358 |
| FEMALE | 1(2.0%) | 4(8.2%) | 1(2.0%) | 19(38.8%) | 24(49.0%) |
| Confidentiality cannot be kept in modern care and should be abandoned | MALE | 7(18.4%) | 19(50.0%) | 7(18.4%) | 3(7.9%) | 2(5.3%) | **0.036** |
| FEMALE | 22(44.9%) | 21(42.9%) | 5(10.2%) | 0(.0%) | 1(2.0%) |
| Close relatives must always be told about a patient’s condition | MALE | 6(15.8%) | 5(13.2%) | 4(10.5%) | 17(44.7%) | 6(15.8%) | 0.676 |
| FEMALE | 7(14.3%) | 4(8.2%) | 7(14.3%) | 27(55.1%) | 4(8.2%) |
| Patients only need to consent for operations but not for tests or medication | MALE | 6(15.8%) | 23(60.5%) | 4(10.5%) | 5(13.2%) | 0(.0%) | 0.218 |
| FEMALE | 9(18.4%) | 33(67.3%) | 4(8.2%) | 1(2.0%) | 2(4.1%) |
| Children should never be treated without the consent of their parents or guardians | MALE | 4(10.5%) | 3(7.9%) | 3(7.9%) | 9(23.7%) | 19(50.0%) | 0.669 |
| FEMALE | 6(12.2%) | 1(2.0%) | 2(4.1%) | 13(26.5%) | 27(55.1%) |
| Doctors and nurses should refuse to treat patients who behave violently | MALE | 5(13.2%) | 18(47.4%) | 7(18.4%) | 4(10.5%) | 4(10.5%) | 0.767 |
| FEMALE | 7(14.3%) | 23(46.9%) | 9(18.4%) | 2(4.1%) | 8(16.3%) |
| If patients refuse treatment due to beliefs, they should be instructed to find another doctor | MALE | 5(13.2%) | 11(28.9%) | 8(21.1%) | 10(26.3%) | 4(10.5%) | 0.467 |
| FEMALE | 4(8.2%) | 19(38.8%) | 15(30.6%) | 7(14.3%) | 4(8.2%) |
| The law allows abortion to be performed , therefore a health worker cannot refuse to do an abortion | MALE | 5(13.2%) | 9(23.7%) | 8(21.1%) | 15(39.5%) | 1(2.6%) | 0.108 |
| FEMALE | 4(8.2%) | 15(30.6%) | 12(24.5%) | 10(20.4%) | 8(16.3%) |
| Patient who wishes to die should be assisted in doing so | MALE | 5(13.2%) | 11(28.9%) | 10(26.3%) | 9(23.7%) | 3(7.9%) | 0.130 |
| FEMALE | 5(10.2%) | 19(38.8%) | 20(40.8%) | 4(8.2%) | 1(2.0%) |

**Discussion:**

Healthcare personnel deal with different ethical issues in day to day patient care. This study raises their opinion towards day to day ethical issues. The attitude towards informed consent, confidentiality, euthanasia and treating non-compliant patients are some of the ethical issues faced by healthcare personnel. This may be influenced by social, cultural and religious background as well as gender.

Mangalore has pioneered Medical excellence in healthcare delivery. It endeavors to meet patient satisfaction through continual improvement of its services, quality Management system and by empowerment of staff. However the four principles put forward by Beauchamp and Childress namely Autonomy, Justice, Beneficence and Non-Maleficence are based on western thoughts, which cannot be applied globally. (5)

In the current study most of them disagreed that ethical conduct was important only to avoid legal litigation similar to the findings of the study conducted by Chopra M et al.(7) In a study conducted by Dash SK (1) to assess the knowledge and attitudes to medical ethics among doctors in Orissa, majority of them were taking proper consent before any examination or procedure and knew that consent and documentation could prevent charges of negligence. These results are similar to the findings of the present study where majority of them had favorable attitude towards informed consent. The findings of our present study are in accordance to the study conducted among North Indian physicians and nurses by Chopra M et al (7)where majorityknew that consent was required for surgeries, tests and medicines. On question on patient autonomy both the medical and dental professionals agreed to the concept. The study showed that there was a significant difference among the professionals when asked regarding the importance of obtaining patients informed consent. This may be due to increasing litigation against health care personnel by patients (5) and increased awareness regarding COPRA (Consumer Protection Act).

A majority agreed to the view that patient confidentiality is important and should not be abandoned which is in agreement to the study done by Chopra M et al.(7) Budimir V et al (8) conducted a study on the knowledge, attitudes and awareness of Croatian Dentists concerning patients’ confidentiality and privacy and all respondents agreed that patients have a right to privacy and confidentiality which is similar to the findings of the present study. In the present study there was a statistically significant difference between males and females in the attitude towards patient confidentiality which is dissimilar to the study conducted by Budimir V et al (8)where there was no difference in knowledge concerning patient confidentiality with regard to gender. Patients expect confidentiality in return of their trust in a doctor patient relationship. A breach in confidentiality results in not revealing all their health information. This would help the patients in revealing even sensitive issues related to health. The perception of Autonomy and Confidentiality is different in different cultures.

In the present study majority of the study subjects agreed that if the law allows abortion to be performed, a health worker cannot refuse to do an abortion which was similar to the study conducted by De La Fuente Fonnest I et al(9) among Danish health care professionals where a majority of them were for legal abortion.

Many of the respondents were against Euthanasia which was in agreement to the study by Chopra M et al (7) and Dash SK (1) where most of them opposed euthanasia in medical practice. This may be because Euthanasia is not yet legalized in India.

In a study conducted by Anup N et al (10) to assess Knowledge Attitude and Practice regarding ethics and law among Medical and Dental professionals in Jaipur City, it was observed that medical practitioners had slightly better attitude than dental practitioners but the difference was not statistically significant. In a study conducted by Janakiram C and Gardens SJ (11) at two medical and dental schools in South India it was observed that there was a difference between the medical and dental students in terms of their attitude to healthcare ethics which was similar to the findings of the present study.

**Conclusion:**

Issues related to ethics showed varying opinions among the health professionals, hence education on application of ethical principles in day to day practice of health care should be made mandatory by the governing body. At the same time it should be based on the socio-cultural background of the region. Workplace education like Seminars, Workshops, CME’s, and Conferences would assist in bridging the gap.

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