**ETHICAL ISSUES CONFRONTED BY MEDICAL STUDENTS IN MEDICAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING**

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**ABSTRACT**

***Background:*** Medical students encounter numerous ethical issues during training at hospitals. Their ethical dilemmas are often of different kind than those confronted by senior healthcare professionals. Though the teaching and training of ethics is a necessary component of curricula of medicine, yet these curricula usually do not cover the specific ethical dilemmas of the students.

***Objective*:** To determine the ethical issues faced by the medical students during their clinical training and education.

***Subjects and Methods***

***Study Design:*** Cross-sectional

***Place***: Public Sector University of Health Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan

***Duration of study:*** April, 2014

***Sample size:*** 200

***Inclusion / Exclusion Criterion:*** All the final year medical students of two medical colleges of the university who consented to participate were included, and those who did not consent were excluded.

***Results*:** Out of 200 final year medical students who participated in the study, 80% (n, 160) had confronted a situation of facing a range of ethical issues during their clinical training and education. They had to face the situation very frequently (60%), frequently (30%) and occasionally (10%). Five percent (n, 10) had no idea of basic principles of bioethics. The study participants had rotation at emergency, out-patient and in-patient ward of all medical and surgical sub-specialties. There was a range of ethical issues / dilemmas reported by study participants. These included telling the truth / disclosure, respecting patients’ wishes / autonomy, patients’ involvement in training, student’s competence, unethical behavior of healthcare providers, teaching with several students encircling a patient, students’ unethical intervention/ actions due to pressure of a poor evaluation, feeling of powerlessness, conflicts of interest, resource allocation, doctor–patient relationship, informed consent, and standard of care.

These issues were never resolved or even discussed with clinical teachers. The study respondents felt guilty for being unable to resolve these issues, and were of the opinion that the teachers were not skilled enough to teach and train the students to resolve ethical issues. Ninety five percent of the study subjects felt embarrassed in witnessing clinical teachers acting unethically.

***Conclusion*:** Unethical behaviour of clinical teachers has a negative impact on students’ moral values. There is a critical need to recognize the ethical issues faced by medical students. This may help develop the ethics curriculum to equip medical students to resolve ethical issues.

***Keywords*:** Ethical Issues, Medical Students, Medical Education and Training.

**INTRODUCTION**

In medical profession, the teaching of Bio-ethics plays a fundamental role to prepare for dealing the ethical dilemmas encountered in the field of medicine. This is not only the necessity of practicing professionals but also of the medical students. The ethical issues and thereby bioethics education has attained a great importance during recent years because of the rising awareness, and magnificent progress in the field of medicine and medical technology.1-3 The teaching of bioethics has been made an essential part of the curriculum in majority of the medical institutions. But this teaching and training of bioethics usually concentrate on the dilemmas that students would face in their future practice, rather than the issues they confront as medical students.4

The young professionals at the level of being students encounter numerous ethical issues during clinical trainings. Their ethical dilemmas are often of different kind than those confronted by senior practicing healthcare professionals.5-7 A lot of research has been carried out to investigate the events and ethical problems encountered by working professionals in the medical profession, but hardly any work has been done about routine ethical dilemmas faced by medical students. The recognition of these issues is crucial for quality healthcare.2,6,8,9 Bio-ethic is an important element of medical education. It has been recognized now as an integral component of future growth of medical students. But the teaching and training of the students in the field of bioethics mostly concentrate on the issues they will come across in their future practice rather than the problems being faced presently as students.3 The course of bioethics being taught today does not give significance to the current dilemmas of the students.6,11

It has been established that the ethical issues confronted by medical students are highly prevalent.9As the peculiarity of ethical dilemmas of medical students is a proven fact, so they should be trained accordingly with basic skills and knowledge to address these dilemmas encountered during their clinical training. A very wide gap has been identified between the existing and desirable education in ethics.5There is a huge difference in the exposures and experiences of senior physicians and students / junior healthcare providers. Because of these differences, it is necessary to formulate curriculum of ethics according to the levels of health professionals.6

The medical ethics curriculum must be revised in such a way that it emphasizes the actual ethical problems faced by the students during their trainings, and equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to identify and resolve their everyday ethical dilemmas.2,8

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature and frequency of the ethical issues encountered by medical students during their education and training, the harmful effects of these problems, and the strategies adopted by them for the resolution of the issues. This will help in developing a curriculum for the ethics course according to students’ needs.

**METHODOLOGY**

A cross-sectional study was conducted at Dow Medical College (DMC) and Dow International Medical College (DIMC) of Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan, in April, 2014. The total number of study participants was 200 final year medical students (150 out of 350 from DMC, and 50 out of 100 from DIMC). The purpose of study was explained to the potential study participants. All the final year medical students of these colleges who consented to participate were included in the study; and those who did not agree to participate, were excluded.

After taking a verbal informed consent, a pre-tested questionnaire was given to the study participants, who were approached in the lecture halls at the end of a class. They were ensured that their identity will be kept secret, and they were not required to mention their names in the proforma.

**RESULTS**

The total number of study participants was 200 medical students of final year MBBS with a male to female ratio of 40:60 (n =80:120) who had less than one year’s time to complete their basic medical education and start working as a healthcare professional. The study participants had rotation at emergency, out-patient and in-patient ward of all medical and surgical sub-specialties. Among them 80% (n, 160) had confronted a situation of facing a range of ethical issues during their clinical training and education. The frequency of occurrence of these problems as stated was very frequently (60%), frequently (30%) and occasionally (10%). Ten percent (n, 20) did not recognize any situation during their clinical training as an ethical issue, and 5% (n, 10) had no idea of basic principles of bioethics.

There were diverse categories of ethical challenges encountered by medical students. Following are the ethical issues / dilemmas reported by study participants.

•Telling the truth / Disclosure of bad diagnosis and poor prognosis (99%)

•Patients’ Desires / autonomy (87%) – includes Family/Patient’s Right to choose, refusal or demand for different treatment plan

•Involving patients in the teaching and training process (82%)

•Student’s capability / confidence (60%)

•Unethical attitude and behavior of others in the team (98%)

•Treating those patients whom they did not like, or were problematic / dangerous (43%)

•Patients’ privacy and confidentiality (40%)

•Bad news communicated to patients / attendants by emotionless doctors (36%)

•Several students around a patient during teaching / training (92%)

•Unethical acts of students because of fear / pressure of seniors (99%)

•Taking the Patient as a Person and respecting her/his emotions (71%)

•Vulnerability / lack of resources of patients (99%)

•Working as both learner and health care provider (31%)

•Feeling of helplessness at unethical acts and incorrect medical decisions by seniors (97%)

•Conflicts of interest (83%) – including Doctor-Pharma relationship, and irrational use/ prescription of drugs, lab investigations, etc.

•Resource allocation and justice (96%)

•Doctor–Patient Relationship (92%) includes Doctor’s attitude and behavior with patients, and patients’ lack of access to information

•Informed Consent (98%)

•Disclosing medical error to the patient (23%)

•Conflict between clinicians usually for personal reasons (26%)

•Sub-standard and low quality practices (99%)

•Cultural issues (86%)

•Language barrier (41%)

All of the study participants reported that the ethical issues faced by them were never resolved or even discussed with their senior clinical teachers. Seventy percent of those final year medical students who had confronted ethical issues felt powerless and guilty for being unable to resolve these issues. They opined that the students should be trained and prepared to face the dilemmas. The study respondents were of the view that the teachers / faculty themselves were not skilled enough to teach and train the students to resolve ethical issues.

Ninety five percent of the study subjects felt embarrassed in witnessing very often clinical teachers acting unethically.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that there are many different types of ethical issues and dilemmas encountered by medical students during their clinical training. These issues also have been detected by various research studies.1,2,5,6,8-10,11

Some of the issues classified by students as ‘ethical’ problems may not necessarily be ‘ethical’ issues. These could be intrinsic professional, social, or administrative problems in the clinical training process, as also identified in other study.7 The recognition of ethical issues requires an appropriate education of ethics.

The teachers are role models and students learn professional ethics from them.12 Most of the students complained of unethical behaviour of clinical teachers, as also has been reported in other studies.4 This may cause a pessimistic effects on students.

There is a lack of training of medical students to cope up the ethical issue specific to them, and they are being prepared for their role as practitioners. The finding is in accordance with the previous research which upholds the idea that proper techniques of teaching ethics to students is lacking that could be used in clinical settings;13 and this can best be accomplished by giving due regard to students’ observations and experiences in formulating the content of the ethics course.14

Almost all of the respondents wanted education and training of bioethics in such a manner that it could enable students to recognize, tackle and resolve ethical issues rationally as has been mentioned in other studies.15,16

**CONCLUSION**

Clinical teachers having unethical behaviour with patients are negative role models for students.

There is a critical need to recognize and understand the prevalence and nature of ethical issues faced by medical students.

The ethical problems as observed and identified by medical students may be employed for the development and implementation of the ethics curriculum. This would help equip medical students to resolve ethical issues.

This study does not provide enough information to formulate a complete ethics curriculum for the training of medical students. There is a need of further studies to recognize the ethical issues of the students for the development of a comprehensive ethics curriculum.

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