

It has been stressed that teaching and training which commence at the start of the course of study in medical and other healthcare professional schools, should be an ongoing process akin to continuing medical and nursing education [19]. Since both physicians and nurses feel that their main source of knowledge of healthcare ethics and law was during experience at work, such job experiences should be used to reinforce ethical knowledge and practice.

Another major finding of the study was that the majority of the respondents did not know enough of the law pertaining to their workplace. Also, there were some physicians and nurses who did not know the contents of their respective codes. The fact that more than 90% of the respondents had no knowledge regarding the Nuremberg Code and or the Helsinki Declaration indicates that there is very little knowledge regarding the ethics of research.

Many of the respondents preferred to consult either their colleague, immediate supervisor or the head of their department for ethical and legal issues. Although many of them have registered with a trade union or a professional insurance company, less than one-third only opted to consult them when faced with a legal problem at work. This is consistent with the commonly preferred opinion to settle the matter in the departmental level rather than taking it farther into higher levels. It is interesting that two-thirds of physicians and one-third of nurses responded that they would consult a colleague despite the feeling that they knew little of the law. Does this reflect a separation of ethical from legal conduct in their minds or a discomfort with discussing problems with seniors? This study was not designed to answer that question. The relatively higher level of response from physicians and nurses that they would consult a lawyer on problems may reflect that the lawyers may be available as friends or relatives rather than any availability of funds for such consultation.

The unawareness regarding the ethical committee in the present study is very similar to another study regarding physicians' attitude and perceptions of a Hospital Ethics Committee from the United States, wherein a large number of professionals expressed dismay at the "invisibility" of the ethics committee [20]. Our Hospital Ethics Committee is currently not well known to many professionals and there is a need for making it aware to the staff of our hospital.

Responses from both medical and nursing practitioners to questions pertaining to practical ethics (Table 4) suggest that the majority of them were aware of the common ethical issues. The significantly stronger opinions of the doctors and the nurses in certain issues such as opinions of physicians and nurses with respect to adherence to

patients' wishes, confidentiality, paternalistic attitude of doctors, consent for procedures and treating violent/non-compliant patients again may reflect the difference in the intensity of training between the two professionals.

On the question of autonomy there was wide difference of opinion among different cadres of medical and nursing staff. In another study on attitudes towards patient autonomy, UK nurses showed a greater commitment to patient autonomy than did any of the US groups, showing that there may be regional variations [21]. The fact that many senior level staff did not feel that the patient's wishes should be adhered to at all times, shows the lack of knowledge of the basic principles of medical ethics.

Ethical case conferences were helpful for many of the respondents to know about ethics. Case conferences are recent phenomena in our hospital and the proceedings of these case conferences are published and made available to all healthcare professionals.

## Conclusion

Physicians and nurses commonly encounter ethical and legal issues in their workplace. However, many of these professionals are either unaware of their importance or unable to appropriately deal with these issues. Since the findings of the study identify that learning at workplace has been valuable to gain knowledge about ethics and law, there is a need to identify those who appear to be indifferent to ethical and legal issues and devise means to sensitize them to these issues in the workplace. Practical education in ethics, particularly in a multidisciplinary setting, could assist in bridging the gap in ethical approaches between nurses and physicians.

## Competing interests

The author(s) declare that they have no competing interests.

## Authors' contributions

SH coordinated the study, interpreted the data, statistically analysed the data and drafted the manuscript. RJ conceived of the study, and participated in its design and coordination and revised the manuscript. EW participated in the design of the study and revised the manuscript. HM participated in the design of the study and revised the manuscript.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## Acknowledgements

The study was funded by a grant from the Sir Arnott-Cato Foundation of Barbados