

STUDY OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ETHICS AND PROFESSIONALISM AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS OF A TERTIARY CARE TEACHING HOSPITAL IN SOUTH INDIA

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Abstract

Background: Professionalism and ethics are essential elements of medical practice. The doctor-patient relationship must adhere to certain ethical standards. The development of technology has also created new moral conundrums and difficulties. Before beginning clinical practice, a medical professional need to learn the virtues of ethics and professionalism. **Methodology:** This cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey was carried out in a medical school that was affiliated with a tertiary care hospital in South India. Results: 42.66% of the participants showed a desirable response for ethics. 11.33% of the participants showed desirable responses for professionalism. 8.66% of the participants showed desirable responses for both ethics and professionalism. **Discussion:** In our study, we found that there is a gap in the knowledge of medical students on ethics and professionalism. The knowledge is very poor on professionalism when compared to ethics with a desirable response of 11.33%. Overall knowledge of ethics and professionalism is also poor with a desirable response of 8.66%. **Conclusion:** Undergraduate medical students have low knowledge of ethics and professionalism. Our study highlights the need for systematic training and the scope for improvement with the systematic training on attitude, ethics, and communication (AETCOM) which has been recently introduced.

INTRODUCTION

Professionalism and ethics are essential elements of medical practice. The doctor-patient relationship must adhere to certain ethical standards. "The physician professional is defined not only by what he or she must know and do but most importantly by a profound sense of what the physician must be," Association of American Medical Colleges President Jordan Cohen stated in his speech.^[1] The privileged status of being a physician comes with the obligation to render service to the sick while maintaining the highest ethical and professional standards.

Different institutions and nations have different codes of ethics and behaviour. In many nations, including India, new medical graduates still take the ancient Hippocratic oath as a pledge to uphold the standards of professional etiquette.^[2] However,

several countries have created their own versions of the code of conduct. The American Medical Association Code of Medical Ethics in the United States provides moral standards that control clinical practice.^[3] In India, there are several obstacles to medical professionalism, and they get worse every day. growing patient access to information, growing demand for specialty services, the influence of business on the development of profit-centered services, and a high patient load, particularly in public hospitals, are some of the challenges that may have an impact on professional values. There are more alternatives for diagnosis and therapy because of the quick breakthroughs in science and technology. The patient's interest must be considered when using the pricy diagnostic and therapeutic techniques. A clinician faces an overwhelming amount of fresh information that is

available but lacks standards or comparisons of effectiveness.^[4]

In today's highly advanced and expensive medical treatments, healthcare practitioners' knowledge of and adherence to medical ethics is a crucial concern. Medical ethics can be defined as the application of moral values to the practice of medicine. Its roots in Western history can be found in the Hippocratic Oath and early Christian doctrines. Unfortunately, not much stress is laid on imparting knowledge of medical ethics to undergraduate students in a medical college, where the attitude and knowledge in various fields of medicine take root among future doctors. It is expected that all doctors in medical practice should be aware of issues in medical ethics lest they are dragged to court and face litigation for non-adherence to basic principles of medical practice. Therefore, in August 2019, the National Medical Commission (then called as Medical Council of India) introduced a new competency-based curriculum that includes a structured longitudinal program on attitude, communication, and ethics (AETCOM) competencies.^[5] With this background, we planned to conduct the present study to assess the knowledge and attitude of undergraduate medical students regarding ethics and professionalism. Low supervisor ratings of doctors' professionalism in medical school appear to be a predictor of state medical boards disciplining them, according to a study among American doctors.^[6] The patient's interest must be considered when using the pricy diagnostic and therapeutic

techniques. A clinician faces an overwhelming amount of fresh information that is available but lacks standards or comparisons of effectiveness.^[7] The development of technology has also created new moral conundrums and difficulties. Before beginning clinical practice, a medical professional needs to learn the virtues of ethics and professionalism.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey was carried out in a medical school that was affiliated with a tertiary care hospital in South India. Permission from the institutional ethics committee was obtained. Each participant was administered a questionnaire following informed consent. The questionnaire contains eleven questions out of which six are related to medical ethics and five are related to professionalism. We used the pre-validated questionnaire in a previous study.^[8] 150 undergraduates medical students participated in the study. Results were analysed in Microsoft Excel. Answering three and above correctly for the first six questions that are related to medical ethics is considered a desirable response and below three is considered an undesirable response. Answering three or above correctly for the last five questions based on professionalism is considered a desirable response and less is considered as an undesirable response.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

Variables	
Age (mean± SD)	22±1.007
Sex	
Male	59(39.33%)
Female	91(60.67%)

*SD- Standard deviation

Out of all the participants, 39.33% are males and 60.67% are females.

Table 2: Knowledge of ethics

Desirable responses	64(42.66%)
Undesirable responses	86(57.33%)

42.66% of the participants showed a desirable response for ethics.

Table 3: knowledge of professionalism

Desirable responses	17(11.33%)
Undesirable responses	133(88.66%)

Only 11.33% of the participants showed desirable responses for professionalism.

Table 4: Knowledge of both ethics and professionalism

Desirable responses	13(8.66%)
Undesirable responses	137(91.33%)

Only 8.66% of the participants showed desirable responses for both ethics and professionalism.

Table 5: Analysis of desirable responses

Component	Mean \pm SD
Ethics	2.5 \pm 2.21
Professionalism	1.5 \pm 0.70

*SD- Standard deviation

DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that professionalism and medical ethics are fundamental skills in the curriculum, many countries have different standards for training in these areas. Before the innovative AETCOM module was implemented in 2019, unlike in industrialized nations, our country's medical curriculum lacked a systematic system of training and assessment. Prior to its implementation, we felt the need for a baseline evaluation to understand students' prior understanding of professionalism and ethical behaviour. To create this baseline information, we conducted a cross-sectional survey using a questionnaire among medical students. In our study, we found that there is a gap in the knowledge of medical students on ethics and professionalism. The knowledge is very poor on professionalism when compared to ethics with a desirable response of 11.33%. Overall knowledge of ethics and professionalism is also poor with a desirable response of 8.66%.

CONCLUSION

Undergraduate medical students have low knowledge of ethics and professionalism. Our study highlights the need for systematic training and the scope for improvement with the systematic training on attitude, ethics, and communication (AETCOM) which has been recently introduced.

Conflict of interest: Nil.

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