

STUDENTS ATTITUDE TOWARDS MEDICAL ETHICS EDUCATION

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Abstract: Medical ethics (ME) and bioethics education are integrated in many medical schools, as a discipline, which aims to help future doctors to recognize ethical issues in healthcare and develop ethical decision-making skills. The main purpose of this paper was to explore students' attitude towards medical ethics and bioethics, as a course of their education curriculum in the Medical University of Sofia in Bulgaria. The goal was to find out students expectations for the contribution of the acquired knowledge to reflect upon the ethical dimensions and human rights considerations of medicine, healthcare and science after the end of their ME course. A paper questionnaire was distributed to medical students with a letter indicating the purpose of the study. All the students were anonymous and voluntarily participated in the survey. Completed questionnaires were received from 344 medical students. According to the results, the majority (94%) of the participants are familiar with the principles of medical ethics and bioethics and supports (86%) the necessity of studying Medical ethics. Most of the students (87%) think that medical ethics education will help them in their future work and believe (86%) that this course will improve their professionalism, while their opinion (70%) is that medical ethics will lead to effectively co-working with other medical professionals.

UDC Classification: 614.2, **DOI:** 10.12955/cbup.v7.1466

Keywords: medical ethics, bioethics, ethical decision making, medical education

Introduction

Medical professionals face ethical dilemmas in their daily practice. It is important for them to be able to identify these ethical dilemmas and provide rational justification for ethical decisions.

Creating a culture of innovation and applying a value-based healthcare in contemporary practice both play a vital role in helping the medical professionals meet the complex social and economic challenges of the 21st Century (Vodenicharova, et al. 2015; World Report on Ageing and Health, WHO, 2015). Applying the principles of biomedical ethics and the ethical principles of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, they will be able to face the moral dilemmas when they make health care decisions.

Medical ethics (ME) and bioethics teaching are integrated as a discipline throughout the first academic year for all specialties in the Medical University of Sofia in Bulgaria. The medical ethics curriculum reflects the changing faces of medicine:

- the relationship between health-care providers and their patients;
- the choice of medical intervention for the individual patient;
- the choice of public health interventions;
- the evaluation of effects of health-care interventions;
- the collaboration between teams engaged in health care activities;
- the choice of goals and methods of medical research (Vodenicharova, et al. 2015; Governance for Health Equity in the WHO European Region, WHO, 2013; Health 2020: A European Policy Framework and Strategy for the 21st Century, WHO, 2013).

The ethical programs help students address new challenges through acquired methodological approaches for analysing ethical cases based on the four principles of biomedical ethics: the principal of respect to the patient autonomy, the principle of non-maleficence, beneficence and the principle of justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2013), and the fifteen bioethical principles in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, adopted on 19 October 2005, the 33rd Session of the General Conference of UNESCO (Bioethics Core Curriculum, UNESCO, 2016, Ethics Education Programme, Division of Science and Technology).

Our updated and modern curriculum for education of ME consists of the UNESCO Methodology and reflects the need for the integration of ME into everyday practice, for augmenting interest and respect for values involved in health care delivery, and for raising awareness for competing interests. Basic components of the new method are: the initiation of and call for active involvement of the students in

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the discussion and decision-making process and the use of real medical cases while dealing with ethical dilemmas.

Special attention is paid to implement appropriate strategies for the development of ethical reflection applying an interdisciplinary approach to address the holistic needs of patients and their families. Knowledge and learning are shared through group exercises and discussions, which enable students to easily learn the ethical methodology (Markova et al., 2015).

The aim of this study was to present the attitude of medical students towards medical ethics and bioethics, as a course of their curriculum. It was also important to determine the expectations of students for the contribution of ethical knowledge in their future work, as well as how medical ethics and bioethics would improve their professionalism.

Methods

In this paper we include the results from a survey that we conducted using a questionnaire from December 2018 to January 2019 in the Medical University of Sofia, Faculty of Medicine among first academic year students, after the end of their ME course. The results provide information about students' attitude towards teaching medical ethics and bioethics and also, their opinion about the application of medical ethics principles into their future work. For the purpose of the survey, we used a questionnaire among 344 medical students. The design of the questionnaire was organized in four parts and included total 19 questions. The collected information was anonymous, and all the respondents were volunteers.

The first part of the questionnaire included demographic characteristics and asked respondents about gender, age, nationality, and academic year of studying. The second part of the questionnaire included questions about students' attitude towards their medical ethics and bioethics course. The total number of questions in this part was 7. The third part contained 6 questions about medical students' opinion on applying the principles of medical ethics and bioethics into their future work. Finally, the last part of this questionnaire included questions about the preferred teaching methods in medical ethics.

The majority of the questions were formulated as closed questions. Statements related to closed questions were given a range for the answer of:

- Yes / No (participants' opinion)
- Yes, No, "cannot evaluate" (participants' opinion)
- "completely agree", "I rather agree", "I cannot evaluate", "rather disagree", and "totally disagree" (participants' attitude towards)

In this article we partially present the results of the second and third dimension of the questionnaire.

Results and Discussion

In developing the questionnaire, we were guided by our curricula, in which we propose an approach to engage students in certain behaviours as determined by two components: attitudes toward the clinical reasoning and ethical consideration and formation, in line with the ethical principles of UNESCO Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights recommendations and the effective practices for learning (Henk ten Have and Michèle S. Jean. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights: Background, Principles and Application, UNESCO, 2009; Nancy Flowers et. al. The Human Rights Education Handbook: Effective Practices for Learning, Action and Change, University of Minnesota, USA, 2000).

Completed questionnaires were received from 344 medical students.

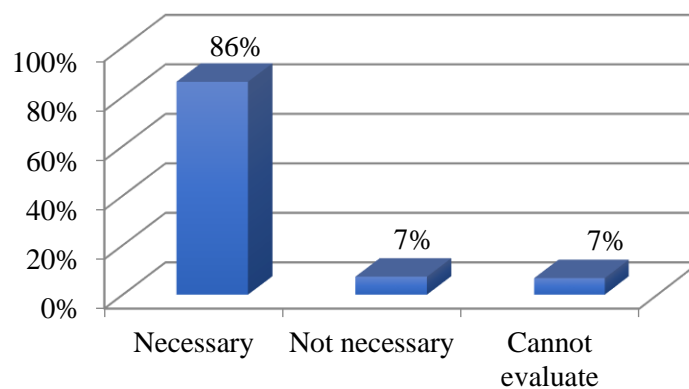
ATTITUDE TOWARDS MEDICAL ETHICS AND BIOETHICS

The answer to the question "in your opinion is the studying of ME necessary" shows that the majority of the respondents 86% stated that it is necessary, 7% answered that it is not necessary and 7% cannot evaluate (Fig. 1).

The feedback of data collected demonstrates that after the end of the semester, 83% are familiar with the Hippocratic oath, while 17% are not.

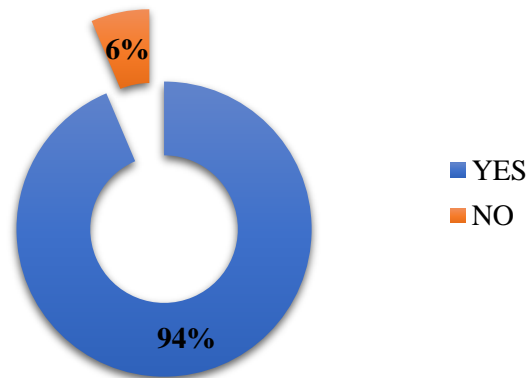
The interesting point is that 94% students are familiar with the principles of ME and only 6% of the respondents are not (Fig. 2).

Figure 1: Participants' opinion regarding the necessity of studying ME.



Source: Authors

Figure 2: Participants' familiarity with the principles of ME.



Source: Authors

The results of the study show that 95% of the participants are familiar with the term “patient –autonomy” and only 5% are not familiar with this term.

According to the data collected 86% of the respondents know what informed consent is and 14% answered that they do not know what informed consent is.

From data collected regarding participants' attitude towards studying ME, 57% completely agree that studying ME is important, 37% stated that rather agree, 5% of the students cannot evaluate, 1% of them rather disagree and only 1 student totally disagreed with the importance of studying ME.

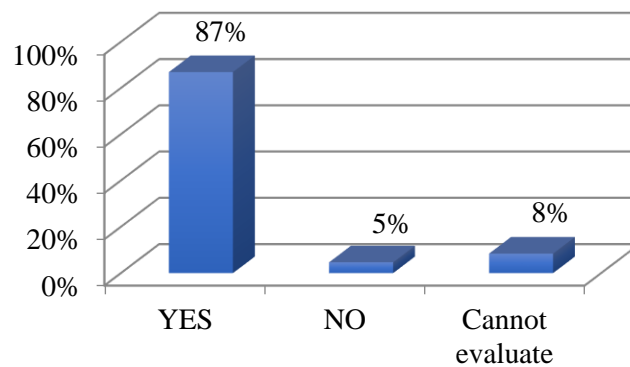
It is worth mentioning that regarding the attitude of the participants towards patient's right to privacy, that the majority of the participants 70% completely agree with the right to privacy regarding the health of the patient, 25% of the respondents rather agree, 4% of them cannot evaluate, 1% rather disagree and only 1 student totally disagreed.

APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES OF ME TO YOUR FUTURE WORK

The answer to our question “do you think that studying ME will help you in your future work”, among all participants 87% answered yes, 5% of the respondents answered no and 8% of them cannot evaluate (Fig. 3).

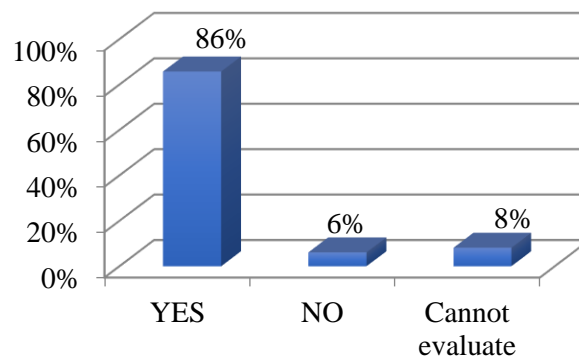
Almost similar are the results to the question “do you think that studying ME improves your professionalism” where the majority of the students 86% answered yes, 6% of them no and 8% of the participants cannot evaluate (Fig. 4).

Figure 3: Participants' opinion whether studying ME will help them in their future work.



Source: Authors

Figure 4: Participants' opinion whether studying ME improves their professionalism.



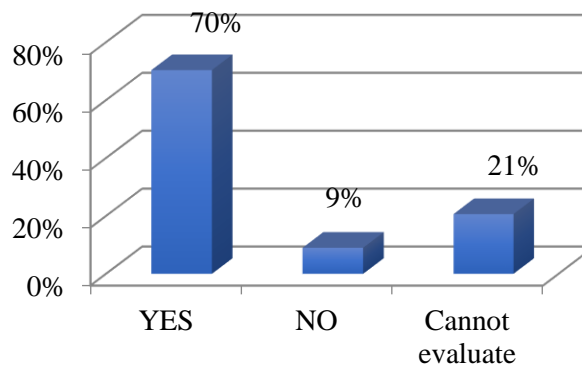
Source: Authors

Related to their opinion to the question “do you think studying ME will improve your patient-doctor relations” 79% of the respondents report yes, 8% no, and 14% cannot evaluate.

The results of the study show that 87% of the participants, support that studying ME will help them recognize and analyse ethical cases in their future work, while 6% do not support that and 7% cannot evaluate.

From data collected 70% of the medical students support that studying ME lead to effectively co-work with other medical professionals, 9% do not support it and 21% cannot evaluate (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Participants' opinion whether ME lead to effectively co-work with other medical professionals.



Source: Authors

To our last question “do you think that studying ME will help you solve the conflicts between patient-doctor relations” the majority 71% of the respondents report yes, 11% answered no and 17% cannot evaluate.

The results of our study demonstrated a positive attitude of our students towards ME education. They consider ME to be their everyday instrument to support their decision making in their clinical practise.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore medical students' attitude towards medical ethics education. Data collected from the questionnaire shows a positive attitude towards ME education. The results demonstrated that medical students support the necessity of studying ME. It is worth mentioning that the majority of the respondents were familiar with the principles of bioethics and ME. Most of them believe that medical ethics education will help them in their future work and support the opinion that such course will improve their professionalism. Finally, the results show that most of the students are confident that medical ethics will lead to effectively co-working with other medical professionals.

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