

Ethics for medical students

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A review of the expectations that people have from physicians show that care, compassion and availability would come at the top of the list. It is being increasingly commented that the type of education we provide in medical schools is not adequate to produce such a doctor¹.

Newer requirements of a “global physician” that can “think globally and act locally” have identified certain competences in a physician: professionalism, commitment to ethical values, critical reasoning skills and communication skills in addition to a sound foundation in science, population health and clinical skills. Again the current curriculum and the teaching learning experiences offered to medical students are found lacking to achieve the goal of producing a compassionate, caring, ethical doctor who can reflect on what s/he reads or sees.

Rapid advances in technology leading to potential harms that it can result in, increasing commercialization and privatization of health care and escalating costs have all contributed to increasing demand for physicians with awareness of ethical issues and skills to resolve them. In response to this realization, WHO both at global and regional levels had taken steps to promote teaching of ethics both in health care practice and research. One of the activities carried out by WHO SEARO had been to review situation with regards to teaching of ethics in six countries of the region (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Sri Lanka). The study concluded that the teaching of ethics in these countries was in a state of infancy, mostly based in the department of forensic medicine which mainly emphasized negligence and malpractice². In response, WHO SEARO has developed a curriculum³ on medical ethics for undergraduates for South East Asian Medical Schools. The curriculum was presented and finalized in the expert group meeting held in WHO SEARO on 25 and 26 September 2008. The proposed curriculum was subsequently endorsed by the medical councils of the region in the second meeting of the Network of Medical Councils of SEARO held in Chiang Mai, Thailand from November 10-12 2008.

The objectives of the module on medical ethics are to enable the students to

- a. Critically analyse ethical issues commonly encountered in medical practice and formulate a framework within which such issues could be resolved;
- b. Demonstrate the ability to resolve ethical issues faced during common clinical scenarios,
- c. Demonstrate awareness of the main professional obligations of doctors,
- d. Practice according to statutory requirements and codes of conduct for medical practice,
- e. Identify the ethical aspects involved in conducting research and apply ethical principles in conducting research,
- f. Demonstrate sensitivity to ethical issues and ethical behaviour within and outside professional practice.

In order to help the students to achieve the objectives outlined above a number of teaching learning methods have been identified. These include a range of teaching/learning activities including lectures, small group discussions, role play, ward based assignments and student seminars. It is recommended that a modular approach which utilizes all the methods mentioned above is used to achieve the learning outcomes.

The content recommended in the module include core topics and other topics. Under the core topics, principles of medical ethics, clinical ethics and professional ethics are to be discussed. Similarly, under other topics, special issues in clinical ethics and research ethics are to be discussed. When one is dealing with clinical ethics under the core topic, different aspects of doctor patient relationship, patient autonomy, confidentiality, informed consent, veracity, truthfulness, helping with end of life decisions, patients' rights and social justice are to be discussed. While helping students to acquire competences related to professional ethics, teachers need to help the students to become familiar with various codes of conduct, concept of professionalism, what constitutes medical negligence and how to avoid them, what is professional misconduct, what ethical dilemmas face medical students, what should be the doctors' relationship

with pharmaceutical industry and issues related to privatization of health care.

“Other topics” are content areas which are of relevance to different clinical disciplines for examples under clinical ethics, the module recommends to provide students with knowledge related to ethical concerns in reproductive health, ethical aspects of genetics, organ donation and transplantation, treatment of mentally ill and children, treatment of patients with HIV/AIDS, resource allocation in health care system, ethics of public health and health promotion, dealing with other systems of medicine etc. Under “research ethics” the module recommends to provide adequate opportunities for learning about principles of research and publication ethics.

The recently revised curriculum of MBBS course at Institute of Medicine has been very forward looking in incorporating the recommendations of WHO to include the objectives of ethics module. Institute of Medicine has been involved in the multicentric study which explored the ethical issues in clinical practice. The South East Asian Health Ethics Network (SEAHEN) study on the subject has resulted in the development of case vignettes which could be used for the learning of ethics⁴. However, implementation of the recently approved curriculum in relation to teaching of ethics will require more efforts. Orientation of the faculty members to the concepts and preparing them to provide appropriate knowledge and skills is an uphill task. Medical Education Department with the help from Maharajgunj Campus can start such orientation and training programme. However, the situation in the colleges affiliated to TU Institute of Medicine may vary from college to college.. These medical colleges depend on a variegated assortment of faculty members drawn mostly from the retired teachers from India. It may be a difficult task for these retired professors to take up a challenge of teaching a new subject. It is time that the Dean’s Office of the Institute of Medicine constitute a task force which will look into the following issues and suggest a course of action: what is the state of preparedness of different colleges and campuses to implement teaching of medical ethics, what changes are necessary in the teaching learning schedule and examination system, what training and resources faculty members need to teach according to recommended module for teaching of ethics. The task force can also review the current situation and the necessary changes needed to implement the revised curriculum which has also incorporated newer sections on communication skills, management of information technology and research methods.

Institute of Medicine has been the first to abide by the recommendations of WHO SEARO to include medical ethics

in its MBBS curriculum; we can seek help from WHO to effectively implement it. Once the task force comes with recommendations on the subject with answers to the questions raised above, approaching WHO for help may look more logical.

References

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