



LEARNING FROM THE DEAD: PERCEPTION OF MEDICAL INTERNS ON POST-MORTEM EXAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

Deceased always speaks truth. Post-mortem examination remains an essential element in medical education, facilitating integration of pathology, clinical reasoning and medicolegal knowledge. However, perceptions of interns toward autopsy exposure may influence learning outcomes and future professional attitudes. This cross-sectional study assessed perceptions of medical interns regarding educational value, emotional impact and ethical concerns related to post-mortem examination in a private medical college in Gujarat, India. A validated, structured questionnaire was administered to 280 interns. Descriptive and inferential statistics were applied using SPSS version 26 of 280 participants (response rate 93.3%), 78.2% perceived autopsy as an indispensable learning tool and 72.5% reported impact on clinicopathological correlation skills. Emotional discomfort was reported by 41.8%, predominantly during first exposure. Female interns demonstrated significantly higher anxiety scores ($p < 0.05$). Prior structured orientation sessions were associated with more positive perception scores ($p < 0.01$). The majority (81.4%) agreed that autopsy enhances understanding of cause of death and medicolegal procedures. The findings indicate that although post-mortem examination is widely valued educationally, structured preparatory modules may relieve moral damage and optimize learning. Integrating reflections and ethics discussions could further enhance educational outcomes.

KEYWORDS : Intern Doctors, Medical education, Post-mortem examination

INTRODUCTION

Autopsy has historically contributed to medical knowledge, quality assurance and clinicopathological correlation¹. Despite technological advances in diagnostic imaging, conventional post-mortem examination continues to hold educational significance in medical training². Exposure to autopsy enables students to appreciate disease progression, confirm clinical diagnoses, and understand medicolegal aspects of death investigation³.

However, declining autopsy rates and limited curricular time have reduced exposure globally. Additionally, psychological discomfort and ethical concerns may influence attitudes toward autopsy participation. Understanding their perceptions is crucial to optimize pedagogical strategies and ensure competency in forensic and pathological sciences.

The present study aimed to assess perceptions of medical interns regarding educational value, emotional response and ethical considerations related to post-mortem examination.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

A cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study was conducted at Parul Institute of Medical Sciences & Research, Limda, Waghodia, Gujarat. A total of 280 medical interns who had attended at least one medico-legal autopsy demonstration were included. Interns unwilling to participate or non responsive during data collection were excluded. Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising 25 items across three domains: Educational value (10 items), Emotional impact (8 items), Ethical and professional perspectives (7 items)

Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Content validity was established through expert review by faculty members in Forensic Medicine and Medical Education. Pilot testing was performed on 30 interns (excluded from final analysis). Participants were briefed regarding study objectives and anonymity. Written informed consent was obtained. Data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics version 26.0. Descriptive statistics were expressed as mean \pm standard deviation for continuous variables and frequencies with percentages for categorical variables. Perception scores were categorized as positive

(>75th percentile), neutral (25th–75th percentile), and negative (<25th percentile). Chi-square test assessed association between prior orientation and perception category. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Participant Characteristics

Of 280 eligible medical interns, 261 completed the questionnaire (response rate: 93.3%). Mean age was 21.3 ± 1.2 years; 54.0% were female.

Perception Toward Educational Value

A majority (78.2%) agreed that post-mortem examination enhances understanding of forensic pathology. Approximately 72.5% reported improved ability to correlate clinical findings with forensic and pathological outcomes.

Emotional Impact

Fifty eight percent experienced initial anxiety or discomfort. Female participants had significantly higher mean anxiety scores compared to males (3.4 ± 0.8 vs. 2.9 ± 0.7 ; $p = 0.02$). However, 68.6% reported reduced discomfort after repeated exposure.

Ethical And Professional Perspectives

Eighty-one percent agreed that autopsy training is essential for understanding medicolegal responsibilities. Structured pre-autopsy orientation was significantly associated with positive perception scores ($\chi^2 = 9.45$, $p = 0.008$).

Table – 1 (Responses As Per Domains)

DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates that most medical interns perceive post-mortem examination as a valuable educational tool. These findings align with previous studies reporting enhanced clinicopathological understanding following autopsy exposure.

Primary outcome analysis indicated high perceived educational benefit (78.2%). Secondary outcomes showed moderate emotional distress, particularly during first exposure, consistent with earlier literature highlighting

anxiety among new learners . Gender-based differences in emotional response have also been documented in similar study .

Importantly, structured orientation sessions significantly improved perception scores, supporting educational models that emphasize preparatory briefing and reflective debriefing¹ .

While autopsy attendance may initially evoke discomfort, repeated exposure appears to foster professional maturity and ethical awareness. Integrating simulation, guided reflection, and psychological support may further enhance learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

Post-mortem examination remains an indispensable experiential learning modality in undergraduate medical education. Although initial emotional discomfort is common, structured orientation and repeated exposure can significantly enhance positive perceptions. Curriculum planners should incorporate preparatory and reflective modules to optimize educational impact while maintaining ethical concerns.

Limitation Of Study: As the sample size is smaller, to generalized the results the study shall be conducted on larger sample size.

Conflict Of Interest: Nil

Source Of Funding: Nil

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