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COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN BIOETHICS AMONG POST- GRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS: AN INTERVENTIONAL STUDY

Community Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Medical ethics is a system of moral principles that apply values and judgments to the practice of medicine. Keeping the above fact in mind, a medical ethics training module for the post graduate students is the need of the hour which is important for their day to day clinical practice, as well as for research purposes.

Methods: For the current module, a pre and post interventional study through a workshop on medical ethics was undertaken among post graduate students from various clinical and Para clinical branches of Jawaharlal Nehru medical college, AMU, Aligarh (n=32). The module was prepared on the basis of four principles of medical ethics- non maleficience, autonomy and shared responsibility, beneficence and justice. The knowledge and skill assessment of the participants were done through pre and post test, feedback from the participants and faculty, and case scenario presentations etc.

Results: The participating students strongly agreed that such kind of a workshop was the need of the hour. This depicted a substantial increase of 71.32±54.62 percentage points between both pre and post workshop sessions, which was found to be statistically significant ($p<0.001$). Overall, a significant increase was observed about the knowledge of communication skills after delivery of the module.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that such module is imperative among students both at undergraduate and post graduate levels for improvement in doctor patient relationships.

KEYWORDS

communication skills, bioethics, post graduate students, medical ethics

INTRODUCTION

The word "ETHICS" is derived from the Greek word – "Ethikos" arising from "custom". It basically deals with the philosophy of morality- to differentiate right from wrong, good from bad, etc. Medical ethics, in the same sense, involve the basic moral issues related to decision making in doing the professional work on a day to day basis.[1]

The development of ethics has a vast history. It always has been present across various civilizations guiding the people to choose what is right, and just among themselves. The Code of Hammurabi, Plato's "Protagoras", The Hippocratic Oath, instructions to doctors in Charak Samhita, The English Medical Ethics, The Georgetown Mantra are only few examples of the codes of ethics and medical ethics that have existed since centuries.[1]

Along with a correct decision making, medical code of ethics are the foundation of a good doctor-patient relationship, good communication and cooperation skills, showing respect for patients and families, transparency, and showing respect for patients' own values, listening to the patient's problems etc. In totality, it can be said that medical ethics are not just thought process, but a set of rules which are meant to guide the health professionals in their decision making and winning the confidence of the people and patients involved in the process.[2]

There are few reasons as to why medical ethics should be taken seriously, the foremost being the resolution of conflicts between patient and physician, to maintain a respectful doctor- patient relationship, to keep a clear conscience, and to make the physician look informed about all the latest developments in patient care.[2] It also helps to prevent negligence and malpractice on the part of the physician by maintaining consent, confidentiality, competence, and advance directives etc.[3]

There are four commonly accepted principles where medical ethics are concerned:

1. Autonomy: or self determination; has been one of the core principles of bioethics over the years. It implies that the patient has a right to make decision regarding the treatment modality on his own, and is a free and voluntary act without any controlling influences. It is this principle which forms the basis of informed consent in patient care.[4]

2. Non maleficience: this principle is related to Hippocratic '*primum nil nocere*'- first of all, do no harm' of medical ethics, though not identical to it[5]. It asserts that a health care professional should not act in such a way as to harm the patient, either through any act of commission or omission. The principle lays down the basis that the healthcare professional should be medically competent.[4]

3. Beneficence: it basically means that the physician has the duty to take such steps which prevent the patient form harm[4]. Its self evident importance marks it as another core principle within Hippocratic tradition: physicians should heal and help their patients, according to the physician's abilities and judgements. The distinctive difference between the principle of non maleficience and that of beneficence is that the former focuses frequently- but not always- on the omission of harmful action while the latter focuses primarily on the welfare of the others.[6]

4. Justice: This principle deals with fair treatment fair treatment to allocation of specifically scarce resources. It focuses on how the human rights are realized in medical practice and how it becomes one of the complex ethical principles leaving behind many questions unanswered. Still, for the physician, the decision should ultimately be considered to be justified in the best favour of patient without breaching his or her legal rights.[7-9]

Lack of communication skills in bioethics can lead to a direct impact in patient compliance, a breach of trust and positive relationship between the doctor and the patient and a hindrance in guiding the patients to carrying out negotiations and conversations about treatment options.[10]

Keeping in mind the importance of necessary communication and ethical skills among doctors, a module on 'communication skills in bioethics' was devised to assess the impact of communication skills in bioethics among post graduate students of Jawaharlal Nehru medical college, AMU, Aligarh, as such a kind of training module is the need of the hour. This module on medical ethics was designed, validated, and standardized through pilot run.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

To prepare a module for teaching and training of appropriate Communication Skills related to bioethics and assess its impact. Keeping in mind the aforementioned aims, the objectives of the study were:

1. To assess the current level of "Communication Skills in Bioethics" of the post graduate medical students through Pre-test.
2. To Teach appropriate communication skills in related scenarios through participatory approach, through the prepared module.
3. To assess the impact of "Communication Skills in Bioethics" of the post graduate medical students through a post-test.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

This pre and post interventional study was conducted among medical post graduate students of Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India. Approval from the medical ethics committee was obtained for the study, after which a core committee was established through meetings onsite and online. A module was prepared and validated based on 4 principles of medical ethics i.e. non maleficience, autonomy and shared responsibility, beneficence and justice. The course material was prepared with a well-defined course outline, explanatory material, evidence based rationale with examples. The duration of the workshop was for eight hours. Pilot run of the module was done on post graduate students of Faculty of Medicine along with feedback questionnaire.

Various competencies were addressed during the workshop which included emphasis on importance of doctor- patient relationship, differentiation between beneficence and non maleficience, demonstration of the ability to make appropriate decisions by proper application of the principles of beneficence and non maleficience, patient autonomy and the concept of consent in case of autonomy, the meaning of justice, its principles and elements in medical ethics etc. These competencies were discussed in detail with demonstration in various sessions throughout the workshop.

For this interventional study, invitation to participate in the above said workshop was sent to the 25 departments of our medical college through their respective Head of the Departments. 32 post graduates from different clinical as well as Para clinical branches from J.N. medical college attended the workshop who gave a pre and post test (MCQ based) and feedback (based on Likert scale).

The knowledge and skill assessment of the participants were done through pre and post test, feedback from the participants and faculty, and case scenario presentations etc.

RESULTS

A total of 32 post graduate students participated in the workshop. An overwhelming response was observed for participation in delivery of the module. Among the feedbacks from the students, they strongly agreed that such kind of a workshop was the need of the hours, while the students acknowledged that the module lived up to their expectations, quality and content was good and relevant, workshop was well organized, duration was adequate, the teaching learning methodology was relevant to the topic students, they strongly agreed that such kind of a workshop was the need of the hours, while the students acknowledged that the module lived up to their expectations,

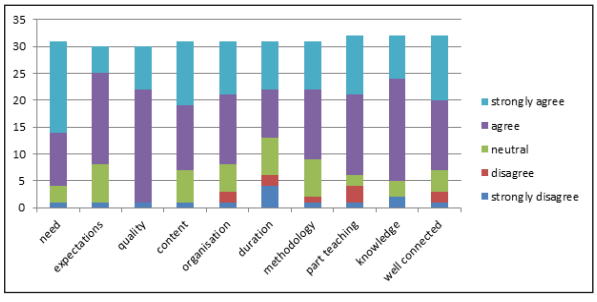

Fig: Student Feedback (N= 32)

Similarly, another feedback was taken from resource persons about the quality and content of the workshop in which it was found that majority of the resource persons strongly agreed to workshop being the need of the hour in the current scenario, relevance of the content, well organization and adequate duration of the workshop, the vast knowledge of the faculty involved in the process and were of the opinion that this module should be a part of teaching of medical post graduates. Apart from this, the resource persons agreed with the fact that the module was up to their expectations, of good quality, would be able to implement knowledge which they have learnt, should be a part of medical post graduate teaching, and helped in changing the understanding towards importance of learning medical ethics.

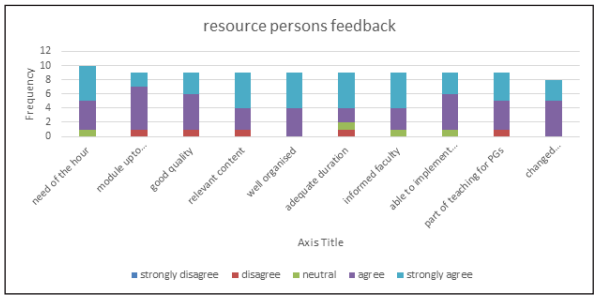

Fig: Resource Person and Faculty Feedback (N= 09)

On statistical analysis, it was found that the mean pre- test score was 8.37±2.43 among the students, which increased to 13.18 ±1.53 during post- test of the workshop. This depicted a substantial increase of 71.32±54.62 percentage points between both the sessions, which was found to be statistically significant ($p<0.001$). Overall, a significant increase was observed about the knowledge of communication skills after delivery of the module.

N= 32 PRE- TEST (MM:20)		N= 32 POST- TEST (MM:20)		PERCENTAGE INCREASE		SIGNIFICANCE	
Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	*t*	*p*
8.37	2.43	13.18	1.53	71.32	54.62	9.46	<0.001

DISCUSSION

Similar findings were reported in a study conducted among medical students in Iran, wherein significant difference was found between the mean scores before and after the workshop ($p= 0.002$), but no significant difference was noted between mean scores during pre and post workshop.[11]

In another study done among 64 participants in India, significant increase in level of knowledge and attitude was reported among post graduates and faculty. ($p <0.05$)[12]. Similar results was reported in a study conducted among 15 undergraduate students in a medical college in Punjab, India, in which significant improvement in knowledge scores was reported from pre and post test scores from the workshop on medical ethics[13].

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

1. Availability of post graduate students was mostly limited as the workshop was organised on a Sunday.
2. Some post graduate students from both clinical and Para clinical departments did not attend the workshop.
3. The session was time bound. Prolonged discussions would have been helpful in a better and deeper understanding of the principles of bioethics.

CONCLUSION:

After the delivery of the module, it was observed that there had been a significant increase in the knowledge of the participants regarding communication ethics, based on assessment of pre and post tests. Also, maximum number of participants (both resource persons as well as students) agreed and strongly agreed on the positive parameters of the workshop. Also, role plays among the participants also depicted the change in the level of knowledge, attitude and skill of the participants in the given situations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

This module should be used to impart training to the post graduates as a part of their curriculum so that they improve in learning skills about patient management in light of Medical ethics.

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