

# Assessment of the Understanding of Medical Ethics Subject among Anbar Medical Group Students

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## Abstract

**Background:** Future doctors and medical students are expected to learn about the important moral ethical communication with their patients and health care personnel.

**Objectives:** The study aimed to have opinion of medical students on medical ethics education.

**Methodology:** Cross sectional study carried out in both medicine and pharmacy colleges of at Anbar University for a period extended from 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2018 till the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2019. The study was conducted on total sample size of 211 both males and females in medical and pharmacist students at Anbar University who age group ranging from 20-24 years old.

**Results:** About 86.3% of students under study believe that medical ethics subject is important in the curriculum of medical group colleges so as to learn basic knowledge of attitude (47.8%), and about 48% have the opinion of taking such subject in the first/second year of college. At the same time, 45.6% of students believe that the subject is boring and patient communication lecture was the highest percentage (47.9%) chosen by students as the most important item among the medical ethics subject.

**Conclusion:** Low perception and knowledge about the importance of medical ethics subject among medical group students in their near future career.

**Keywords:** *Understanding, Medical Ethics, Medical students*

## Introduction

Huge social change is undergoing and people is aware of social determinants of health, so nowadays, the public has a negative view and low trust towards medical doctors because they believe that doctors are putting their own interests before those of their patients. These believe has resulted in reducing the compliance of the patient and increasing the communication conflict between doctor and his patient<sup>(1)</sup>. For these reasons, doctors should be aware of these determinants that influence patients'; and a process of effective and good doctor-patient communication should be established to improve patient compliance and recall, adherent to treatment and even symptom reduction. In addition community participation, health services and social groups can share and built right communication between the two sides<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

Healthcare professionals should understand ethical communication with their patient and begin to practice it in their career which includes, autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence<sup>(4)</sup>. Hippocratic Oath and Helsinki declaration put these ethical philosophies to be practice in real medical life<sup>(5)</sup>. Although in developing countries this item and matter it is still challenging, but future doctors should learn these moral ethical principles and such programme for medical professional ethics shouldn't be weak in such countries<sup>(6)</sup>.

Incorporating ethical elements into the medical group education curriculums is an ongoing process in medical institutions and it gives an accreditation of medical schools<sup>(7-9)</sup>.

Medical students as future healthcare professionals better to enhance their knowledge on professional practice and safeguarding ethics and their rights as well

as their patient's rights<sup>(10)</sup>.

Assessment of the students is also required in medical ethics education, just like in other fields of medicine<sup>(10, 11)</sup>. Proper assessment of students should be performed in a way to ensure efficiency of ethics education and to help students recognize the humanitarian aspect of medicine and gain necessary skills to analyze ethical dilemmas in clinical practice<sup>(12)</sup>.

Medical students in Iraq in the last three academic years in the college are in direct clinical practice experience with health care personal and with patients in both hospitals and primary health care centers, while in the last academic year, pharmacy students are in orientation and clinical practice with health care services and patients. The current study aims to assess the knowledge of medical and pharmacy students in Anbar University for medical ethics subject and practice.

### Methodology

After taking the ethical approval from both medical and pharmacy colleges, informed consent and permission from students, this cross sectional study carried out in both college of medicine and pharmacy in Anbar University for a period extended from 4<sup>th</sup> of November 2018 till the 28<sup>th</sup> of May 2019. The study was conducted on total sample size of 211 both males and females in medical (4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades) and pharmacist (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> grades) students at Anbar University who age group ranging from 20-24 years old. A non-response rate or incomplete information of 6% only.

All students in all grades included in the study have taken medical ethics subject in their curriculum "medical students at fourth, fifth, & sixth grade, while pharmacy students at third, fourth, & fifth grade".

The questionnaire include demographic characteristics of students (age, grade, type of study, and gender) in addition to questions related to the importance of medical ethics, about the year they prefer to take the subject, ethical attitude towards different aspects of the subject in college and hospital. Their relationship with medical staff in their future career. Questions about the intension to apply what they have learned in their career and the fields covered by the curriculum lectures in medical ethics were also included.

The questionnaire form has been distributed to students and was collected at the end of the day, some

students have the time and opportunity to answer the questions immediately through closed and opened ended questions.

Data and variables were coded and entered in IBM SPSS Statistical Packages for Social Sciences version 25. Data were presented as frequency and percentages and descriptive results were done for each questionnaire in form of tables and charts.

### Results

Table 1 describes the basic characteristic of study population of students. Male represent 43.6% in the study while female were 56.4% of the total sample size. 54.4% were medical students (fourth, fifth, & sixth grade) and 45.5% were pharmacy students (third, fourth, & fifth grade).

**Table 1: The basic characteristic of study population (n=211)**

		No	%
Gender	Male	92	43.6
	Female	119	56.4
College	Medicine	115	54.5
	Pharmacy	96	45.5
Grade	Third pharmacy	34	16.1
	Fourth pharmacy	38	18.0
	Fifth pharmacy	24	11.4
	Fourth medicine	46	21.8
	Fifth medicine	27	12.8
	Sixth medicine	42	19.9

Regarding medical ethics subject, table 2 shows that 86.3% of students agreed that medical ethics is important subject in medical and pharmacy colleges curriculum "and better to be taken at first/second years of study (47.9%)". 47.8% of students think that it is important as it provides basic knowledge to student's attitude while only 7.7% relates its importance as it is studied in all other universities and it provides students with guidelines (44.5%).

**Table 2: The importance of medical ethics subject**

		No	%
Think the subject is important	Yes	182	86.3
	No	29	13.7
Why it is important	Basic knowledge to attitude	87	47.8
	Important & studied by other universities	14	7.7
	Provide students with guidelines	81	44.5
At which year students prefer to take the subject	First/Second year	101	47.9
	Third year	64	30.3
	Fourth year/Higher	46	21.8

Results of the study revealed that 73.0% of the students like the subjects and finding it interesting (46.8%), easy (34.4%), good marks can be get in it (11.7%), taught in good aspect by teachers (2.6%), the subject focused on important ethical issues (1.3%), and finally help them to learn how deal with patients in good manner (3.2%). The rest (27.0%) who did not like the subject, they believe that the subject is boring (45.6%), has no clinical knowledge (35.1%), difficult to be understood (3.5%), and teacher couldn't deliver the subject properly (15.8%) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Students like the subject or not and why.**

		No	%
Do you like the subject	Yes	154	73.0
	No	57	27.0
Why do you like the subject	Interesting	72	46.8
	Easy	53	34.4
	Good marks can be get in it	18	11.7
	Taught in good aspect by teachers	4	2.6
	Focusing on important ethical issues	2	1.3
	Learn how to deal with patients in good manner	5	3.2
Why you did not like it	Boring	26	45.6
	No clinical knowledge	20	35.1
	Difficult to be understood	2	3.5
	Teachers could not deliver the subject properly	9	15.8

The intension of students was explored and showed that 38.9% would always apply what they have learned in their future career while only 8.5% reported that they rarely or never use it later on in practice life (Table 4).

**Table 4: The intension of students to apply what they learned.**

		No	%
Do you have the intension to apply what you have learned in your career	Always	82	38.9
	Not always	50	23.7
	May be	61	28.9
	Rarely	10	4.7
	Never	8	3.8

Regarding items provided by lectures, table 5 shows that patient communication item was among the highest percentage (47.9%) chosen by students, then confidentiality, respect patient, and relationship with other colleagues (27.0, 26.5 & 24.6% respectively) followed by euthanasia (16.1%).

**Table 5: The opinion about the most important lecture in the subject.**

		No	%
In students opinion, the most important lecture they took that will be of concern about in their career	Patient communication	101	47.9
	Confidentiality	57	27.0
	Respect patient	56	26.5
	Relationship with colleagues	52	24.6
	Euthanasia	34	16.1
	Medical report	16	7.6
	Anonymous	8	3.8
	Breaking Bad News	2	0.9

Table 6 describes how to deal with colleagues mistakes, 34.6% believed they should give him an advice after his mistake while 22.7% believe one should correct his mistake, tell other colleagues (14.2%), warn hospital management (11.4%) and even tell his patients about the mistake (10.9%).

**Table 6: Dealing with colleagues' mistakes and deal with other health staff.**

		No	%
How would you deal with your colleagues mistakes	Give him advice	73	34.6
	Try to correct the mistake	48	22.7
	Tell other colleagues about him	30	14.2
	Warn hospital management	24	11.4
	Tell his patient	23	10.9
	Do nothing	6	2.8
	Don't know	7	3.3

## Discussion

In the recent years ministry of higher education in Iraq has been focusing on such subject to be enrolled in the curriculum of medical group colleges including medical, dentistry and pharmacy colleges because of its important for future doctors and pharmacist. In our study, although about (86.3%) of students agreed that the medical ethics is important subject in their curriculum and only (13.7%) of them consider it not that important. Also in our study (44.5%) of students think it gives students and future doctors guidelines for their career in medical practice while (45.6%) and (35.1%) they think medical ethics subject and practice are boring and lack of clinical knowledge respectively. These findings in our study are in agreement with the results reported by other studies that highlighted the presence of major important gaps in knowledge and attitude of doctors in recognizing autonomy, patients' right and ethical principles importance their profession<sup>(13-16)</sup>. Cruess *et al.* alerts the fact of medicine has lost the autonomy in addition to the influence throughout the world<sup>(17)</sup>. Although our study was mainly on students but it reflects their thinking and attitude towards medical ethics in the near future, as we found in the current study that only 38.9% of students will "always" apply what they have learned in medical college about medical ethics and commitments.

Saeed & Al-Jawadi (2017) in their article identify that 50% of participant in study was not sure about physician's commitment towards their patients and that there physicians are focusing mainly on clinical practice more than ethical practice<sup>(18)</sup>. In our study, about (48%) chose first/second grade in medical group colleges to give medical ethics subject and (30.3%) chose third year medical group colleges to give such subject. In a study done by Sadaf *et al.* suggested that it is important to give these components of medical ethics to third year medical students so as to build trust and respect relationships with patients<sup>(19)</sup>. In this study, (4.1%) of students claim that the teacher couldn't deliver medical ethics subject to students, this make us to think to change learning activities approach or tools such as role play exercises, programmers and interactive seminars<sup>(20)</sup>.

In conclusion, low perception and knowledge about the importance of medical ethics subject among medical group students to their near future career. Still medical students thinking towards clinical practice side and view more than ethical side and this give us alarming sign to change learning tools used in teaching such

essential subject in their medical curriculum. Patient communication was among the highest percentage chosen by students concern among other different lecture items. More efforts should be done by the college, department and lecturers to give rise to new teaching approach to this subject and to decide on which grade it should be given to medical group students.

**Ethical Clearance:** The Research Ethical Committee at scientific research by ethical approval of both environmental and health and higher education and scientific research ministries in Iraq

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