REPORT

On the integration of Ethics into the Physiology curriculum

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Abstract

A one-day state-level workshop was organised in Karnataka to share the experience of a programme implemented earlier, in 2015-16, at St John's Medical College, Bengaluru that integrated the teaching of ethics into the physiology curriculum. The aim was to develop the programme further, list the challenges likely to be faced while scaling it up, and identify other colleges which could participate in the scaling up. Twenty-eight participants, representing 13 medical colleges, and five resource persons attended the workshop. There was a consensus that the integration of ethics into the physiology course was relevant and desirable, although the participants identified several critical challenges which might arise. These included the lack of institutional support, a possible lack of student “buy-in” since it was beyond the requirements of the examinations, and time constraints. Specific areas of integration were identified. Three medical colleges, including the host institution, opted to implement the programme and refine it further.

Introduction

Medical ethics is taught in some medical colleges today, often as a separate subject (1,2). More people are now trained in medical ethics through a variety of courses (3–6). The widely available basic textbooks in medical ethics and bioethics are an additional resource (7–9). The Medical Council of India has suggested that the teaching of ethics should form an integral part of medical training (10,11).

An alternative approach is to integrate ethics into the core subjects taught to medical students. Such an approach might provide a contextual understanding of ethics and its application in medicine (12–14). The integration of ethics into the physiology curriculum is particularly relevant since the first year has often been described as a “dehumanising” or disconnected experience in medical training (15,16). Exposure to experimental, human and clinical physiology provides opportunities for discussions on research ethics, animal ethics and clinical ethics.

A programme on integrating ethics into the physiology curriculum, initiated by the Department of Physiology for I MBBS students of the 2015–16 batch of St John's Medical College, Bangalore, has been described in detail elsewhere (17). The experience of this programme was the basis of the workshop. The workshop was held at the college on August 23, 2016 with the following objectives:

1. To delineate the potential areas in the physiology curriculum in which medical ethics could be integrated
2. To understand the problems and challenges that could arise from such integration across a range of medical colleges (private and government, and with varying student strengths)
3. To share the students’ and faculty’s feedback on the programme in terms of content, method and outcomes, and obtaining their views on the programme’s scalability
4. To discuss methodologies for the implementation of such a programme, given the constraints imposed by the problems and challenges identified.

Workshop methodology

Twenty-eight participants (F=23, M=5), representing 13 institutions (12 private and 1 government) from Karnataka attended the workshop. The participants were divided into five groups, with five to six members in each group. There were three sets of group activities. In the first activity, the participants enumerated the ethical issues that could be integrated into the physiology course. The second was a mock session on integrating ethics into the teaching of physiology, with each group developing the method/process of such integration. The third activity focused on identifying the challenges in the implementation of such a programme. Finally, a panel discussion was held between the participants and the resource persons, who attempted to bring together the various issues that had been raised. After giving written informed consent, the participants provided their qualitative feedback by filling in the pre- and post-workshop questionnaires.
Outcomes of the workshop

Table 1 presents the participants’ list of the ethical issues that could be integrated into the teaching of physiology. It also details the objectives of each session and mentions the part of the curriculum in which such an intervention could be accommodated. While there was considerable overlap with the original integrated programme, there were some new topics which reflect wider ethical issues that influence the teaching of physiology and medical education in general. These topics were “gender issues during clinical examination,” “honesty and punctuality as a virtue,” “fabrication of medical reports” and “plagiarism in research activities.” The participants came up with diverse methodologies, such as role play, clinical case scenarios, interactive discussions and PowerPoint presentations. Each group prepared and presented a mock session on one ethical issue to get hands-on experience in planning short and effective interactive sessions.

The challenges to the effective implementation of such a programme, as identified by the participants and their ideas on how to address these challenges are indicated in Table 2. Among the several critical challenges identified were the lack of institutional support, a possible lack of student “buy-in” since the programme went beyond the requirements of the examination, and time constraints. These were perceived as bigger issues in government than private medical colleges. However, since the workshop was attended by only one faculty member from a government medical college, further elaboration of the comments on these lines may not be generalisable.

Feedback from the participants

The participants found the workshop “novel,” “an eye-opener,” and “innovative” in terms of the concept. Importantly, the percentage of participants who felt that integrating ethics
into the physiology course was essential increased from 61% (17/28) pre-workshop to 83% (23/28) post-workshop. Five participants, who initially felt that the integration programme was not relevant and would interfere with the teaching of physiology, had changed their opinion by the end of the workshop. Four participants felt that the integrated programme should be optional and opined that it might interfere with the teaching of the regular course. Since the “existing physiology curriculum is very tightly packed, students may not pay attention to ethics”. The pre- and post-workshop scores indicated an increase in the participants’ confidence in their ability to facilitate and integrate such a programme in their own institutions.

**Post-workshop impact**

The value of the workshop became evident at the time of the submission of this report. Three medical colleges (total yearly intake=450) that participated in the workshop, including the host institution, have committed to implementing the integrated ethics programme during 2016–17 for first-year medical students pursuing the physiology course in their respective colleges. The host institution has since increased its student intake from 60 in the year 2015-16 to 150 in 2016-17. The data from a scaled up initiative would help the Medical Council of India’s Attitude and Communication (ATCOM) Competencies (10,11) plan to be implemented in an integrated manner within core subject training.

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