

ETHICS DIMENSIONS IN DENTISTRY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to assess the knowledge of students from the Faculty of Dentistry in Iasi, Romania, on these ethical issues: doctor-patient relationship, mistakes and errors in the dental practice, ethical law. **Material and methods:** The study was conducted in 2014 on a sample of 124 students who completed a questionnaire specially designed for this purpose. **Results:** 90% of the students agreed with the ethical principles relating to autonomy and privacy of patients' data and 93% of them agreed with the patient's reporting of intra-operative complications. The responses to the questions that refer to violent patient and those infected with HIV demonstrate that there is no unity in resolving these controversial issues: only 62% of students agree with treating HIV-infected patients, and 14% of students agree with treating violent patients. **Conclusions:** The vast majority of those surveyed were interested in continuing the implementation of teaching methods for the emphasize of ethical principles in dental practice.

Key words: dental students, ethical principles knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Ethics is a discipline that involves identifying and solving moral issues in an attempt to clarify and separate the notions of good and evil. Medical practice ethics issues arose with the beginnings of Western medicine in the 5th century BC Ancient Greece, at the same time giving birth to what is believed to be the first attempt to systematize and solve them as Hippocratic Oath (1).

The term "bioethics" was first introduced by Van Rensselaer Potter in 1970, considering

bioethics as a new discipline that combines biological knowledge with the system of human values (2). Ethical issues that physicians are facing in today's society became more complex and seem to occur more often than the ones they faced in the past. Given the current direction of health

systems, it is essential that staff working in dental science understand and fully respect the codes of professional ethics and deontology established by competent organisms (3).

Ethical dilemmas are an inevitable component of medical activity and any dentist faces them during his career. Clearly, the assimilation of ethical principles that constitute a "moral compass" begins in the early years of academic education and also at that time the first ethical decision-making skills are emerging.

The aim of our study is to know the position of young practitioners concerning some general aspects of medical bioethics, given that they are in the transition from academia to the professional environment. Rating students' outlook about the ethical dimensions of dental practice could predict future ethical problems that they might encounter during their careers.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Cross-sectional study was conducted in 2014 on a sample of 124 students of the Faculty of

Dental Medicine in Iasi, 68% females and 32% males. Most participants were final years students: 91 (71%) of them - 6th year, and 33 (29%) of them - 4th year. To find out what is their knowledge about the bioethics and medical law in Romania, a questionnaire was created, with 13 questions that involve the following areas: Doctor-patient relationship, Mistakes in the dental practice, Medical law. The data was analyzed with SPSS 14 program. To test the difference between the answers the

Chi square test was used, with a statistical significance threshold of 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Responses from the questionnaire are presented in Table 1 and are divided into 3 sections: doctor-patient relationship, mistakes in the dental practices and knowledge about ethical law. Responses to section 1 of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Students' responses about doctor-patient relationship

DOCTOR-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP	Agree (%)		Disagree (%)		Chi square	p-value
	Nr	%	Nr	%		
1.Consent for every dental treatment	91	74	33	26	3.12	0.003*
2.Patient's autonomy	90	73	34	27	4.12	0.003*
3.Confidentiality in dentistry	119	96	5	4	21.3	0.001*
4.Obligation to treat infected patients	76	62	48	38	5.23	0.023*
5.Obligation to treat violent patients	17	14	107	86	32.3	0.002*
6.Parental consent should be necessary for children treatment	116	94	8	6	25.40	0.001*

*=statistical significance (p<0.05)

1. Doctor patient relationship

The results showed that most students, 119 (96%), consider privacy an ethical principle particularly important in dental practice, and 91 (74%) and 90 (73%), respectively, agree with the principles of patient consent and autonomy -items 1, 2, 3.

Dentists obligation to treat violent patients (item 4) is appreciated by only 76 (62%) of the

students who responded to the questionnaire, and treatment of HIV infected patients is considered a moral duty of the dentist by only 17 students (14 %). A high percentage of students (94%) responded positively to question 10 (*Parental consent should be necessary for children treatment?*).

II. Mistakes and errors in the dental practice (table 2)

Assessing students' opinion related to patient information in the case of complications occurrence (item7), it was found that 115 (93%) of the participants agreed that reporting of intra-operative complications to the patient is mandatory, but their number was much lower in what concerns family information, too- 81, 66% (item 8) .

Students' responses to question 9 showed that more than half of them (55%) considered that a patient refusing dental treatment should be guided to another doctor.

A percentage of 76% of the participating students agreed that medical ethics issues should be reported to the College of Dentists (item 10).

Table 2. The students' responses about mistakes in the dental practice

MISTAKES IN THE DENTAL PRACTICE	Agree (%)		Disagree (%)		Chi square	p-value
	Nr	%	Nr	%		
7. Informing the patient in case of complications	115	93	9	7	7.45	0.001*
8. Informing the family in case of complications	81	66	43	34	5.22	0.002*
9. If a patient refuses treatment he should be referred to another doctor	68	55	56	45	0.113	0.217
10. Ethical issues should be reported to the College of Dentists	94	76	30	24	3.02	0.024*

*=statistical significance (p<0.05)

III. Knowledge about ethical law

Only 26% of the investigated students were aware with the aspects concerning ethical law, and 54% of them had information about the existence of the ethics committee in our university. 87% considered ethical conferences and case presentations as necessary (table 3).

Table 3. Students' responses about ethical law

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT ETHICAL LAW	Yes (%)		No (%)		Chi square	p-value
	Nr	%	Nr	%		
11. Do you know about ethical law in Romania?	32	26	92	74	2.41	0.013*
12. Do you know about the existence of the ethics committee in the university?	67	54	57	46	0.21	0.422
13. Is it necessary to make ethical conferences?	107	87	17	13	32.12	0.014*

*=statistical significance (p<0.05)

Relative to the year of study (Table 4) statistically significant differences were observed between the answers given by the students of the 6th and those of the 4th year:

The same trend was observed in what concerns the treatment of HIV positive patients: the percentage of those who

78% of the students in the 4th year and 66% of the students in the 6th year, respectively, disagree with the treatment of violent patients(p=0.02)

disagree with this statement was higher in the fourth year (57%), compared to the sixth year, 32% (p=0.02).

Table 4. Students' responses reported to the year of study

	Yes(%)		No (%)		Chi-square	p value
	IV year	VI year	IV year	VI year		
Treatment of violent patients	22	44	78	66	12.23	0.001
Treatment of HIV patients	43	68	57	32	4.67	0.002

DISCUSSIONS

The relevance and importance of ethical issues in dentistry have increased lately, and dentists should have the ability to maintain the highest standards. The need to align the medical activity to the ethical principles is highlighted in the Faculty of Dentistry even in the first years of study by the module of bioethics. We considered as useful the attempt to find out what the perceptions of students in the final years are on this aspect. We found that most students agree with the ethical principles that express patient autonomy and consent in achieving specialized treatments, 90% and 90%, respectively. Every physician has a different approach to the problem of autonomy, 73% of the respondents preferring to give the patient more freedom of decision regarding their own treatment, while the remaining 23% adopt the paternalistic model in the doctor-patient relationship, according to which the patient is required to undergo the doctor's decision, who has full authority, without giving importance to the patient's wishes (4).

Although patient privacy is an important ethical issue, negative situations are found in the literature. A study in Brazil showed that although most doctors (91.43%) claimed that the cabinet auxiliary staff has been trained to respect the confidentiality of patient data, 44.29% of those surveyed act contrary discussing clinical cases with people outside the dental cabinet (5).

A special case is the treatment of minors, in this context the final decision belonging to the family, provided its information and advice in advance (6). Although ethical principles and law require guardians consent when it comes to the treatment of children, there are some difficult situations generating ethical dilemmas, such as the decisions of tutors to the detriment of patient: for example, they may refuse a treatment indispensable for a children's health (7). Art. 13 of Law no. 46/2003 contains the following provision: "If health providers consider that the intervention is in the interest

of the patient and the legal representative refuses to give consent, the decision is declined to a specialized arbitration board " (8).

The physician should provide accurate information about the diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options and risks, and about the possible consequences involved by patient's refusal to receive the necessary care. Thus, we found that 93% of students agree with patient information in case of intra-operative complications, but the obligation to inform the family, too, is considered a duty by only 66% of them. There are situations that could put doctors in difficulty, such as the one when the patient expresses the refusal to be treated, though treatment would bring health benefits and could halt progression of the disease and prevent the onset of complications (9). Depending on the reasons for the patient justifies the refusal, he/she could be forwarded to another doctor with another specialty or another type of professional experience that could address the patient in a different manner or could provide a second medical opinion.

With this statement agreed only 68% of the students. In Romania, the organism empowered with prosecution and punishment of disciplinary violations and possible sanctions is College of Dentists; these should be known by all the practicing physicians, whereas the lack of such information could create future bureaucratic and procedural impediments. 94% of the 124 investigated students believe that ethical issues should be reported to the College of Dentists, and 32% of them do not know the local laws. Another situation that would embarrass even an experienced dentist is linked to the treatment of aggressive patients. Managing such a situation requires tact, self-restraint, objectivity, patience and good will of the doctor and knowing the methods that can prevent triggering a violent episode (10). In our study, 107 students did not consider themselves obliged to treat such patients, and the percentage was higher in IVth year (78%), compared to the VIth year (66%). Regarding the issue of HIV infected patients,

the results of the study conducted in Iasi for the students in Dental Medicine showed that only 62% of them consider that the dentist has an obligation to treat HIV positive patients. Reported to the year of study, 57% of fourth year students do not want to treat infected patients, compared to 32% of the sixth year students. An explanation of reducing this percentage would be that, in the final year, after several internships, students have more knowledge about the prevention of infection transmission in the dental office. These results are consistent with those reported in studies conducted in 1994 and 2005 in the UK and the USA, which concluded that 60% of the students in the final years would accept treating HIV-positive patients (11,12). Some aspects regarding students' attitudes towards HIV-positive patients are reviewed by the literature, suggesting that these attitudes could be improved by providing educational experiences and comprehensive information (13).

The need to emphasize, within the educational process, some legal provisions, and the need for courses and conferences on the subject is supported by the small percentage of students (26%) who said they were familiar with the medical law in Romania. Furthermore, only 54% of the students claimed to have knowledge of the existence of an ethics committee at the university. Some authors consider that the presence of lecturers with various studies within the departments of the discipline of bioethics and deontology could be

appropriate, this type of association facilitating multidisciplinary approach to issues for discussion and providing accurate information concerning legislation (14).

CONCLUSIONS

1. The results of the study conducted in the Faculty of Dental Medicine in Iasi showed that most students consider necessary to align the dental practice to the rules of medical ethics, which demonstrates that young practitioners start their career recognizing the importance of ethical and deontological principles that should be taken into consideration in the daily activity.

2. Statistically significant differences were observed in what concerns violent patients and those infected with HIV, the percentage of students who refuse the treatment of these patients being higher in the IVth year than in the VIth year.

3. The vast majority of those surveyed were interested in continuing the implementation, within the educational programs, of some teaching methods that simulate real situations and emphasize ethical principles that underlie good dental practice.

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