

# TEACHING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS TO UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

Professional ethics is considered a very important component of medical education in recent times. It is about the moral conduct of medical personnel in a professional context. Teaching this subject in an undergraduate medical program is of prime importance as ethical issues are embedded in everyday professional life. It is thus important not only to provide students with a sound knowledge base of legal, moral and social aspects of this subject, but also to equip them with the much needed ethical reasoning and interactional skills right from the start of their professional life. A variety of teaching- learning strategies as well as assessment strategies have been tried in this regard, given the range of learning issues and objectives they are designed to cover. All have their own set of advantages and disadvantages. We describe here two such teaching- learning activities and their preferred assessment strategies most suited for the purpose mentioned herein.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethics has been defined as the science of morals, and encompasses the rules of conduct governing human interactions.<sup>1</sup> Management of moral issues arising out of patient care often involves more than just the patient's medical condition and is the essence of professional medical ethics.<sup>2</sup>

Ethical arguments may either have a firm religious or universal basis or a more flexible and relatively circumstantial basis. These need to be recognized for a practical approach to ethical reasoning. The traditionally described fundamental principles for the practice of medical ethics are: Respect for patient autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice.<sup>2</sup> These form the pillars on which the structure of eth-

ical reasoning is erected and ethical dilemmas sorted out and resolved.

### RATIONALE FOR TEACHING PROFESSIONAL ETHICS TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

The importance of ethics in medical profession is being increasingly recognized with the advent of growing public awareness regarding ethical conduct of health care professionals, lack of clarity in clinical research practices and technological advancement in medical field. A myriad of novel ethical issues have also arisen with the onset of immense scientific innovations in medical science. These need to be dealt with professional sensitivity, in light of the ethical principles in the proper context.<sup>1,3</sup>

All of the above factors reinforce the importance of teaching profes-

sional ethics, and the need for bio-ethical teaching curricula for medical students, right from the start of their professional life. Concomitant with international recommendations, professional ethic courses have now started finding their way into undergraduate medical curricula, although still in the initial phases in many medical schools.<sup>1,4,5</sup>

The rationale for teaching professional ethics to undergraduate students is to:

1. Sensitize them to recognize and critically analyze their own moral beliefs and that of their colleagues in various ethical situations early in their professional life.<sup>6</sup>
2. Inform them of various codes of ethics.<sup>5</sup>
3. Enable them to recognize ethical issues in various clinical situations.<sup>4,7</sup>
4. Equip them with a practical, social, contextual and legal knowledge base.<sup>4,5,7</sup>
5. Enable them to develop ethical reasoning skills based on their knowledge in clinical situations. These situations do not need to be necessarily 'dilemmas' in medical

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practice but more importantly, common day to day issues.<sup>6,7</sup>

- Equip them with pertinent interactive skills to apply this reasoning effectively. Providing the knowledge base and communication skills in this regard is one of the main aims of a formal professional ethics course.<sup>7</sup>

#### TEACHING STRATEGIES

There is a general opinion that medical ethics teaching and training should be done throughout the five year medical program in a longitudinal manner with knowledge base being formed in the initial years and application of basic concepts in clinical context in later years of the program. A combination of large and small group teaching formats may be used in keeping with the diverse nature of objectives.<sup>5</sup> These include lectures and seminars, case based learning, problem based learning, community based teaching, project work, presentations, standardized patients, audiovisual material, ward based ethics rounds and role plays etc.<sup>5</sup>

Case based learning is a valuable method of instruction in ethics teaching.<sup>3</sup> Used in a small group format, it can be effectively utilized to develop skills for analyzing and resolving ethical dilemmas. This can be achieved through a systematic approach to reach an ethical judgment. Studies have proposed ways of achieving this by applying the principles and values of general ethics in a structured approach strategy to the specific case scenario in order to resolve it.<sup>2</sup> One such approach may be through use of algorithms<sup>3,4</sup> by giving students a case vignette which provides a context for the ethical dilemma under consideration. Students are taught to identify the conflict in the given clinical situation and find out if there is an available legal or ethical consensus in the case context; In case there is no consensus available, identify the ethical appeals i.e. consequences presented by the case, fundamental principles of ethics (autonomy, beneficence,

non-maleficence, justice) and physician virtues (integrity, honesty, courage, altruism) required in the given context, search for conflicts among these appeals and provide an argument to resolve the issue based on priority of appeals. If there is an ethical consensus available on the situation at hand, use it in relevance with the ethical appeals mentioned before and develop a management plan to deal with the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Another important component of teaching professional ethics is the interactional skills involved in communicating sensitive issues i.e. mainly the affective component.<sup>8</sup> Role plays may be effectively used especially during the latter half of an undergraduate medical program for teaching interactional skills in difficult situations for example discussing terminal illness or death, taking informed consent, confidentiality issues etc. Knowing about these issues is imperative but translating that knowledge in a real and sensitive situation needs a different strategy in itself. This is where role plays can help with a script provided for students or for standardized patients who provide the reality component in teaching and learning of these interactional skills.<sup>9</sup>

#### ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

Multiple assessment strategies may be used in accordance and in alignment with the learning objectives and learning strategies used. Multiple choice questions, Short answer questions, modified essay questions, OSCEs, structured vivas, case based discussions, multisource feedback and portfolios are a few to be named.<sup>5</sup>

When looking for a good assessment strategy for ethical reasoning skills which may be taught through case based learning, I find the most appropriate assessment strategy to be an ethics script concordance test (SCT).<sup>10</sup> Ethical decision-making depends primarily upon the quality of ethical reasoning, the assessment of which is particularly difficult. Script concordance test is a tool which

provides a good platform to assess reasoning skills in clinical as well as ethical situations where there is no single true answer to a problem and the best approach has to be reasoned out and judged.<sup>10</sup>

Role plays for teaching professional ethics communication skills may be assessed effectively through OSCE's.<sup>9,11</sup> OSCEs have been found equally useful in assessing competency to address ethical issues as for other clinical skills in various studies.<sup>11</sup> OSCE can assess students at the 'shows how' level of competence in a controlled environment, for which standardized patients may be used.<sup>9,11</sup> This would encourage students to sharpen their interactional skills in the ethical context in a more close to real life situation although there may be some logistic constraints for carrying out such an assessment.<sup>11</sup>

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