

HEALTH CARE STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE OF THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

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Abstract : Health care specialists practice their profession in accordance with the rules of good medical and clinical practice. Young specialist should be aware of certain ethical rules and apply the Code of professional ethics for nurses, midwives and associated medical specialists in Bulgaria. Ethical codes are rational control mechanism for different professional groups. They reduce the chance of taking moral risk and therefore have a preventive role. The purpose of codes is to clearly delineate responsibilities, not to dictate specific actions. Therefore, they correlate with responsibilities. The ethical guidance of good medical practice helps medical staff to improve professionalism; to ensure the quality of medical services and to reduce the risk for patients.

The aim of our survey is to study out the knowledge of healthcare students in Medical University-Sofia about ethical dimensions of professional responsibilities.

Methodology: Sociological (documentary method and direct individual questionnaire) and statistical methods were used for the purpose of the research. The study was conducted through an online survey among students from the Faculty of Public Health "Prof. Dr. Tsekomir Vodenicharov, DSc", Medical College "Yordanka Filaretova" and University Branch "Prof. Dr. Ivan Mitev" – Vratsa.

Results: In our survey took part 310 students from various medical specialties. Over half of the participants (51%) are studying to become nurses. 69.5% of the students are familiar with the professional code of ethics and even greater proportion are familiar with the rules of good practice in healthcare (89%). 94.8% report that they have the same attitude to patients with different social and economic status and 98.1% answer positively to the question “My professional activity is based on competence, the quality of medical care and patient care”. 29.3% have been in conflict situation with patient and 33.8% had conflict with a colleague. Considering that respondents are students, we assume this percentage as high. Lack of good communication and understanding of rights and responsibilities can be a prerequisite for broken trust.

In conclusion, our study gives grounds to claim that future healthcare professionals are aware of their professional responsibilities, incl. their ethical aspects. Increasing knowledge and experience in dealing with conflict situations would contribute to better relationships with patients and colleagues.

Keywords: healthcare students, professional obligation, ethical code, ethical guidance for good medical practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Over time, nursing practice has emerged as an independent profession based on theoretical knowledge, practical experience and scientific justification. The nursing profession is diverse and responsible. (Taylor, 2012) Nurses and other health care professionals face specific ethical issues in their practice. Their professional appearance requires dealing with a number of different personal, interpersonal, professional, institutional and socio-cultural challenges. (Stievano & Tschudin, 2019). This arises from the place they occupy in relation to patients, their relatives, doctors and other members of the medical team. (Shtereva- Nikolova & Goranova-Spasova, 2014; Taylor, 2012)

Health care professionals perform different roles. In addition to caring for the patient (which is their main role), they educate and counsel the patient. They may also be required to perform administrative functions and coordinate activities. Specialists often participate in teams conducting clinical trials and engage in scientific activity. The question of liability is complex, especially considering that nurses and other health care professionals largely fulfill a doctor's orders. (Chakarova, 2011)

Deontology (from the Greek deon - debt and logos - science) is the science of the duties and related rights and responsibilities of workers practicing their profession. Medical deontology provides guidelines for proper behavior in complex situations when conflicts and disputes arise. (Aleksandrova, 2010; Vodenicharova & Popova, 2019)

Professional responsibility involves making decisions about what is good or bad, right or wrong, taking into account the consequences of the action. (Chakarova, 2011) Health care professionals practice medicine in accordance with the Guidance for good medical and clinical practice. Young specialists should be aware of certain ethical rules and apply the Code of professional ethics for nurses, midwives and associated medical specialists. (Bikova, Vasileva, Dimitrova, Terzieva, Chaneva, 2015)

The aim of our survey is to study out the knowledge of healthcare students in Medical University-Sofia about ethical dimensions of professional responsibilities.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey was conducted online between June 2022 and September 2022. A total of 310 students in Healthcare were enrolled. An original questionnaire was developed for the purposes of the study.

The following methods were used:

- A documentary method for researching and analyzing the literature available on professional responsibilities of healthcare workers;
- Questionnaire method: Anonymous online direct individual questionnaire among healthcare students from the Faculty of Public Health "Prof. Dr. Tsekomir Vodenicharov, DSc", Medical College "Yordanka Filaretova" and University Branch "Prof. Dr. Ivan Mitev" – Vratsa;
- Statistical methods: The statistical data package SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 19.0 was used to process the survey data. A wide range of descriptive and analytical (Chi-square test and Fisher's exact test) methods were used. The results are described by tables, graphs and numerical indicators for structure, frequency, averages, correlation coefficients, etc.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In our survey took part 310 students from various medical specialties. Over half of the participants (51%) are studying to become nurses. Half of the respondents are in the 18-30 age group, followed by those in the 31-40 age group. (24.2%) and those between 41-50. (20%). A large part of the students turn to the medical profession at a later stage of their life path, driven by personal motives, and this has been a trend in recent years in Bulgaria.

Students who are completing the first year of their studies predominate. In the horary of all specialties, the discipline Medical Ethics and Deontology is studied in the first year of study.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the students who filled out valid questionnaires.

We analyzed a number of theoretical statements, codes of ethics, normative documents in regards to professional responsibility of nurses and other healthcare professionals. As a result, statements and questions were formulated.

Ethical codes are rational control mechanism for different professional groups. (Bulgarian association of health professionals in nursing, 2015) They reduce the chance of taking moral risk and therefore have a preventive role. The purpose of codes is to clearly delineate responsibilities, not to dictate specific actions. Therefore, they correlate with responsibilities. In Bulgaria healthcare professionals comply with the *Code of professional ethics for nurses, midwives and associated medical professionals in Bulgaria*. (Bulgarian association of health professionals in nursing, 2015)

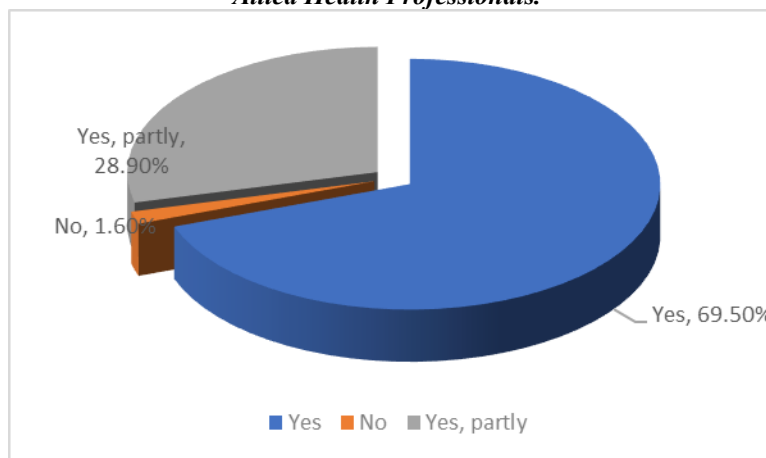
As Tollefsen et al (2020) state, there is a lack of studies on ethical responsibility in nursing. (Tollefsen, Olsen, Clancy, 2021) The profession of nurses, midwives and associate healthcare professionals is related to the following fundamental responsibilities: health promotion; disease prevention; restoring health and alleviating suffering. Respect for human rights, devotion and responsibility are typical for these professionals. It's their duty to practice their profession conscientiously and to justify the trust that society has given to them. Ethical norms in the Code manage the behavior of health care professionals and their relationships with the patient and his relatives, colleagues, doctors and society. (Bulgarian association of health professionals in nursing, 2015)

We asked students if they are familiar with the Ethical code of nurses in Bulgaria. 69.5% of them answer they answered affirmatively and almost 30% answer "Yes, partly" to this statement. (fig. 1)

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the healthcare students

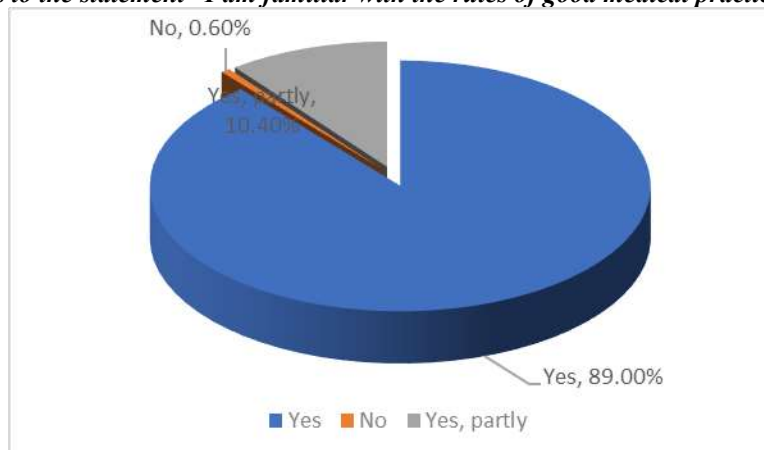
Sex	N	%
Female	273	88.1
Male	37	11.9
Age	N	%
18-30 years	155	50.0
31-40 years	75	24.2
41-50 years	62	20.0
51-60 years	17	5.5
over 60 years	1	0.3
Specialty	N	%
Nurse	158	51.0
Midwife	16	5.2
Physician Assistant	16	5.2
Physiotherapy	3	1.0
Medical laboratory technician	46	14.8
X-ray laboratory technician	35	11.3
Rehabilitator	21	6.8
Assistant pharmacist	6	1.9
Massage therapist	1	.3
Medical cosmetics	8	2.6
Year in university	N	%
First year	204	65.8
Second year	18	5.8
Third year (for Bachelor students)	43	13.9
Third year (for Professional Bachelor students)	41	13.2
Fourth year (for Bachelor students)	4	1.3

Fig. 1: Answers to the statement “I am familiar with the Code of Professional Ethics for Nurses, Midwives and Allied Health Professionals.”



Guidance for good medical practice helps medical staff to improve professionalism; to ensure the quality of medical services and to reduce the risk for patients. Good medical practice reflects the ethical aspects and duty of medical professionals. (Vodenicharova, Gradinarova, Deliverska, 2020) The document was developed by the National Quality Council of the Bulgarian Association of Healthcare Professionals and were finally adopted by this Council on August 10, 2020 and supplemented by the Executive Agency "Medical Supervision". (Bulgarian association of health professionals in nursing, 2020) In our survey the results show that students are more familiar with the Guidance for Good medical practice in healthcare- 89% confirm that that. (fig. 2)

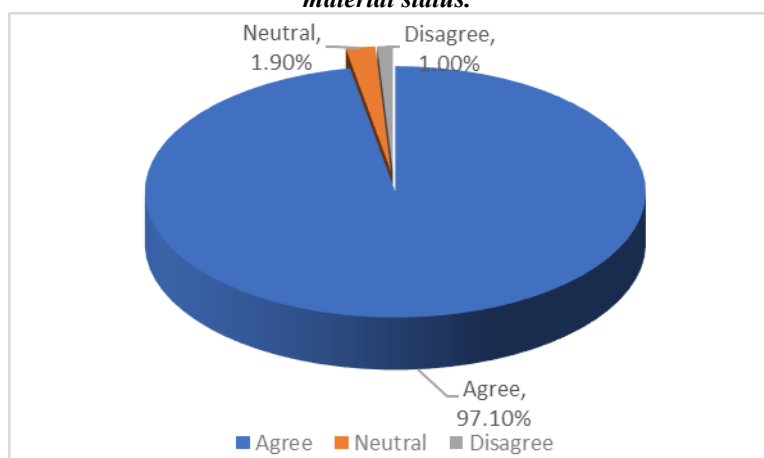
Fig. 2: Answers to the statement “I am familiar with the rules of good medical practice in healthcare.”



69.5% of the students are familiar with the professional code of ethics and even greater proportion are familiar with the rules of good practice in healthcare (89%).

The *Code of professional ethics for nurses, midwives and associated medical specialists* states that health care professionals must be impartial towards patients of different social, social and material status, as well as show tolerance for patients' religious beliefs, ethnic traditions and political affiliation. Although foreign studies show that students observe unethical practices, they must apply the basic principles in nursing (autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, fidelity, integrity, justice) (Albert, Younas & Sana, 2020) It is noteworthy that the statement "I have the same attitude towards patients with different social, social and material status" is again answered affirmatively by almost all students. (fig. 3)

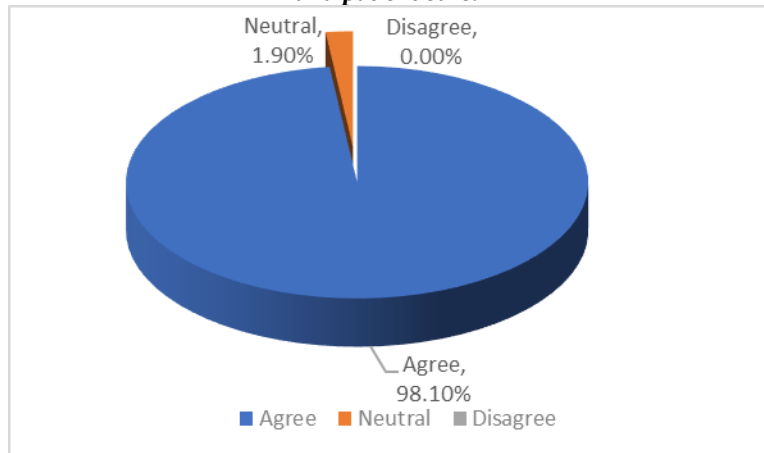
Fig. 3: Answers to the statement “I have the same attitude towards patients with different social, social and material status.”



Healthcare professionals apply all scientific and professional knowledge, skills, experience and qualifications for the good of their patients. (Shtereva- Nikolova & Goranova-Spasova, 2014; Andersson et al, 2022) Professional competence and the quality of the medical service are important criteria that are also enshrined in the Code. Almost all surveyed students agree with this statement (98.1%) and no statistically significant difference was found by gender, age, marital status and course of study.

Article 2 of the Code of professional ethics for nurses, midwives and associated medical specialists says: "The profession of health care professionals is based on: professional qualification, competence and responsibility".

Fig. 4: Answers to the statement “My professional activity is based on competence, the quality of medical care and patient care.”

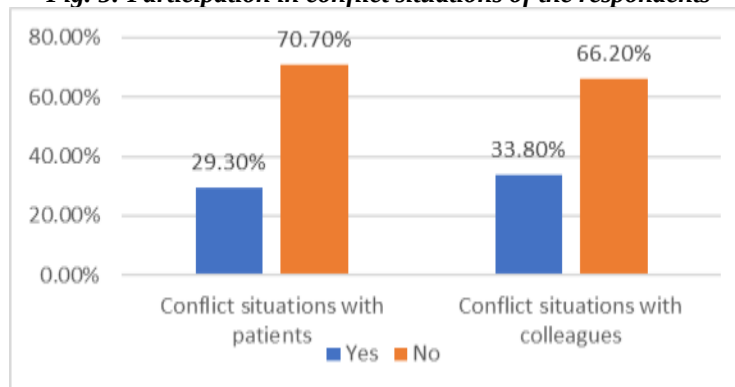


97.1% of the respondents report that they have the same attitude to patients with different social and economic status and 98.1% answer positively to the question “My professional activity is based on competence, the quality of medical care and patient care”.

Medical deontology provides guidelines for proper behavior in complex situations when conflicts and disputes arise. Ethical competence of specialists improves their communication skills and is a prevention for conflict situations. (Lechasseur, Caux, Dolle & Legault, 2018) On the following figure we can see that conflict situations with patients and colleagues are not rare. (fig. 5) 29.3% have been in conflict situation with patient and 33.8% had conflict with a colleague. Considering that respondents are students, we assume this percentage as high.

Lack of good communication and understanding of rights and responsibilities can be a reason for broken trust. (Dobrilova, Stefanova & Yankova, 2016)

Fig. 5: Participation in conflict situations of the respondents



4. CONCLUSIONS

Analyzing the ethical dimensions of the professional responsibility of students we came to the conclusion that future healthcare professionals are familiar with the content of the Code of professional ethics for nurses, midwives and associated medical specialists and the Guidance for good medical practice. Knowledge of these national documents is not a guarantee of morality, but is a prerequisite for proper assessment and analysis if an ethical conflict occurs in medical practice.

Our study gives grounds to claim that future healthcare professionals are aware of their ethical responsibilities practicing medicine. In the training in Medical Ethics and Deontology, various practices are recommended to develop skills for ethical reflection and ethical decision-making by future specialists. Increasing knowledge and experience in dealing with conflict situations would contribute to better relationships with patients and colleagues.

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