

Original Research Article

Awareness of Ethical Issues in Modern Day Dental Practice: A Survey-Based Study in Riyadh Elm University

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Accepted, 13th July, 2019.

Introduction: Ethics and moral values are the vital components of any dental practice. It is imperative for a dental professional to follow these values as dentistry as a profession enjoys the ability to make independent decisions for the patients. **Materials and methods:** This is a cross-sectional study involving an open-ended questionnaire which was distributed among dental students of all clinical levels. A total of 432 students took part in this study. **Results:** A total of N=432 students participated in this study, which comprised of n=212 males (49%) and n=220 females (51%). As far as the dentistry levels were concerned, 22% from level 8, 15% from level 9, 17% from level 10, 16% from level 11 and 30% from level 12 were included in this study. **Conclusion:** Females tend to show better empathy and professional standards as compared to males.

Keywords: Ethics, Professionalism, Decision making, Dental treatment.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics and moral values are the vital components of any dental practice. It is imperative for a dental professional to follow these values as dentistry as a profession enjoys the ability to make independent decisions for the patients. This may result in dentists abusing their authority and using situations to their advantage. Several teaching methods including debate can be utilized in order to teach the undergraduate students about dealing with ethical issues (Hanna et al, 2015).

Health care professionals are in continuous exposure to the ethical dilemmas and they encounter these situations as early as their undergraduate training. Males have been found to be more stable in making decisions as compared with the females. Furthermore, students tend to be less empathetic as they move forward in their clinical training (Monrouxe et al, 2014).

As mentioned above, various techniques can be used to teach students how to deal with ethical situations. One of these is to encourage health professionals to work in team settings. Although this is not the case with every private dental practitioner, yet they can be a part of a small team within their clinical setting. Studies have revealed a positive effect of teamwork on making ethical decisions (Wilhelm et al, 2014).

These training programs or courses may be helpful in improving the ethical behavior of dental students. Ilguy et al (2015) demonstrated an association between education and witnessing better ethical decision making. They concluded that

there was a marked upgrade in the level of awareness in ethical practice after the students were provided with a lecture. Consent form is a very important tool of ethical approval from the patient as it serves as a contract between the two parties. Several studies have taken place in order to measure the knowledge of dental students regarding the use and importance of informed consent form. Gupta et al (2014) investigated the level of awareness among dental students from different educational stages. He revealed that the junior dental students' knowledge regarding informed consent was unsatisfactory as compared to senior dental students.

Principles of ethics should be followed and implemented in all healthcare fields including dentistry. One of the major factors that affect this issue is the overall socioeconomic statuses of several countries. It is believed that the higher a country moves in the economic category, there is an increased level of ethical practice being observed (Adhikari et al, 2016).

AIMS OF THE STUDY

- To measure the level of ethics and morals among the dental students of Riyadh Elm University.
- To compare between junior and senior dental students.
- To compare between males and females.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a cross-sectional study involving an open-ended questionnaire which was distributed among dental students of all clinical levels. A total of 432 students took part in this study. Ethical approval was acquired from the Institutional Review Board before the surveys were being sent out. Online survey was constructed using Google forms and distributed using student emails.

The survey included questions related to demographics, ethical knowledge and attitudes. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS version 19 with descriptive statistics including frequencies and cross tabs (chi-square test).

RESULTS

A total of N=432 students participated in this study, which comprised of n=212 males (49%) and n=220 females (51%). As far as the dentistry levels were concerned, 22% from level 8, 15% from level 9, 17% from level 10, 16% from level 11 and 30% from level 12 were included in this study.

The comparison groups comprised of gender and dentistry levels. No significant differences among gender were revealed when inquired about what ethics meant (p-value 0.764), importance of ethics in dental practice (p-value 0.776), favoring patients' satisfaction over clinical points (p-value 0.772), informing the patient about clinical mishap (p-value 0.947), sharing patients' information with other patient (p-value 0.101),

performing experimental procedures on patients (p-value 0.298), explaining the treatment details before beginning (p-value 0.680) and informing the patient about the long duration of treatment (p-value 0.417). However, only one statistically significant difference was seen when inquired about agreeing to patient's request of performing procedure which is not suitable for him/her. Male students responded that they would perform the procedure (22%) as compared to female students (15%).

On the other hand, a few statistically significant comparisons were reported when we compared the responses among dentistry levels of clinical students. An overall better knowledge among level 10 students was observed as compared with other junior as well as senior students. Senior students were professional in informing the patients about clinical mishap, which was statistically significant as compared to junior levels (p-value 0.001).

Level 8 students were also found to be efficient in maintaining their ethical standards when inquired about patients' confidentiality (p-value 0.037). However, no statistically significant differences were found when inquired about performing experimental procedures (p-value 0.182), agreeing to patient's demand of performing procedure not suitable for him (p-value 0.321) and needing more information on dental ethics (0.896).

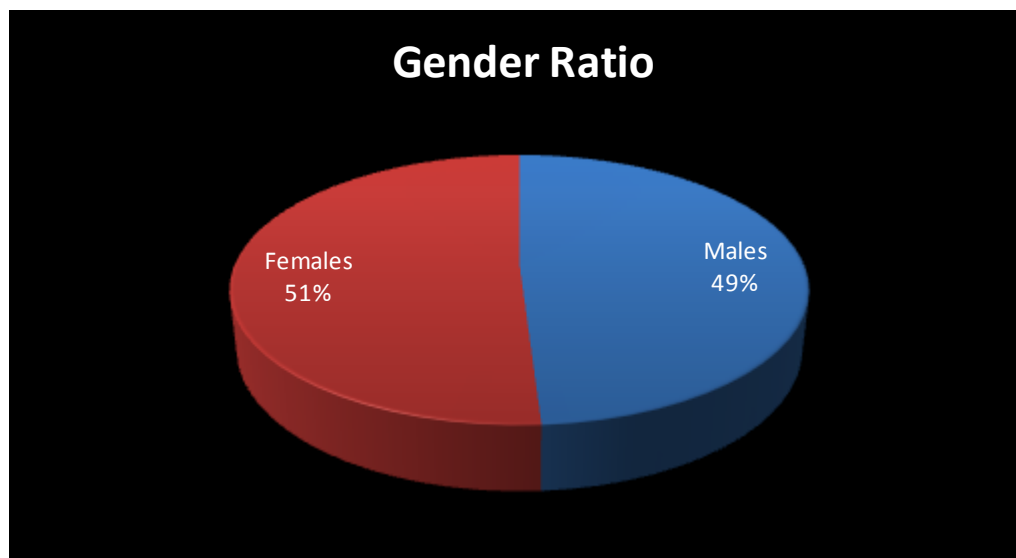


Figure 1: Gender ratio of the study participants

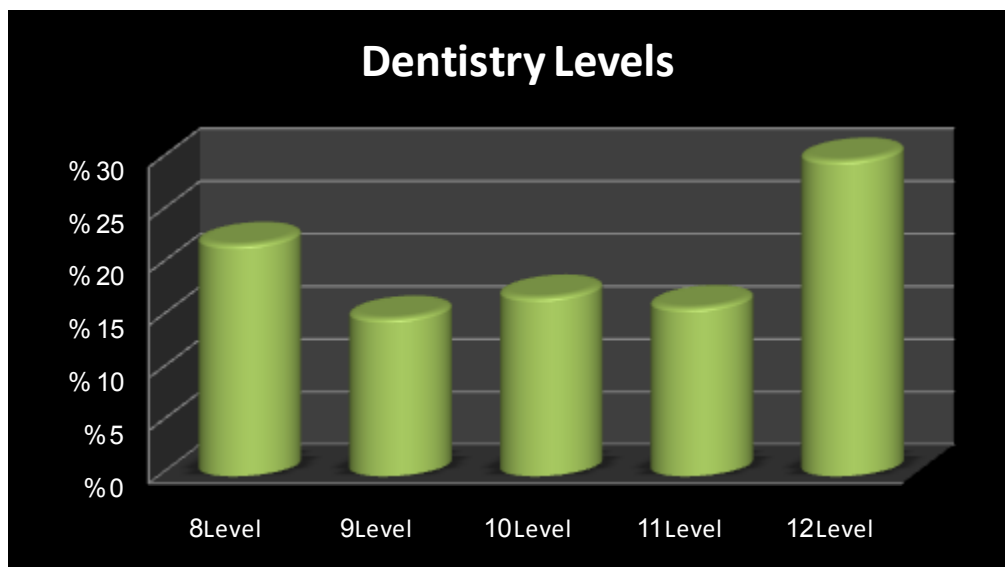


Figure 2: Dentistry levels of students taking part in this study

Table 1: Comparison of survey responses on the bases of participants' gender

Item	Males	Females	p-value
Aware of the word 'ethics'?	Not aware: 7% Somewhat aware: 35% Very much aware: 58%	Not aware: 6% Somewhat aware: 38% Very much aware: 56%	0.764
Ethics is essential in running a dental practice?	Not important: 5% Somewhat important: 34% Very important: 61%	Not important: 3% Somewhat important: 34% Very important: 63%	0.776
Patient's satisfaction is more important than my clinical points?	Not important: 7% Somewhat important: 43% Very important: 50%	Not important: 7% Somewhat important: 40% Very important: 53%	0.772
Inform the patient about any clinical mishap?	Never: 11% Sometimes: 38% Always: 51%	Never: 13% Sometimes: 36% Always: 51%	0.947
Can share patient's private information with other patients?	Never: 50% Sometimes: 29% Always: 21%	Never: 55% Sometimes: 32% Always: 13%	0.101
Can perform experimental procedures on my patients?	Never: 17% Sometimes: 39% Always: 43%	Never: 12% Sometimes: 40% Always: 48%	0.298
If patient wants expensive 'unsuitable' treatment, I will do it?	Never: 37% Sometimes: 41% Always: 22%	Never: 48% Sometimes: 36% Always: 15%	0.046
Explain the side effects and cost details of procedure before I start?	Never: 7% Sometimes: 30% Always: 63%	Never: 5% Sometimes: 33% Always: 62%	0.680
Inform the patient about long duration of treatment in dental school?	Never: 9% Sometimes: 36% Always: 55%	Never: 7% Sometimes: 32% Always: 61%	0.417
I need more information on dental ethics?	Yes: 57% Maybe: 33% No: 10%	Yes: 57% Maybe: 34% No: 9%	0.896

Table 2: Comparison of survey responses on the basis of dentistry levels.

Item	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10	Level 11	Level 12	p-value
Aware of the word 'ethics'?	Not aware: 24% Somewhat aware: 27% Very much aware: 48%	Not aware: 3% Somewhat aware: 48% Very much aware: 49%	Not aware: 1% Somewhat aware: 34% Very much aware: 65%	Not aware: 2% Somewhat aware: 40% Very much aware: 58%	Not aware: 1% Somewhat aware: 39% Very much aware: 60%	0.000
Ethics is essential in running a dental practice?	Not important: 20% Somewhat important: 33% Very important: 47%	Not important: 3% Somewhat important: 38% Very important: 59%	Not important: 3% Somewhat important: 24% Very important: 73%	Not important: 0% Somewhat important: 41% Very important: 59%	Not important: 1% Somewhat important: 30% Very important: 69%	0.000
Patient's satisfaction is more important than my clinical points?	Not important: 22% Somewhat important: 39% Very important: 39%	Not important: 3% Somewhat important: 47% Very important: 50%	Not important: 4% Somewhat important: 37% Very important: 59%	Not important: 0% Somewhat important: 42% Very important: 58%	Not important: 2% Somewhat important: 45% Very important: 53%	0.000
Inform the patient about any clinical mishap?	Never: 23% Sometimes: 35% Always: 42%	Never: 14% Sometimes: 42% Always: 44%	Never: 8% Sometimes: 37% Always: 55%	Never: 4% Sometimes: 46% Always: 50%	Never: 6% Sometimes: 34% Always: 60%	0.001
Can share patient's private information with other patients?	Never: 65% Sometimes: 24% Always: 11%	Never: 51% Sometimes: 36% Always: 13%	Never: 59% Sometimes: 28% Always: 13%	Never: 38% Sometimes: 38% Always: 24%	Never: 48% Sometimes: 31% Always: 21%	0.037
Can perform experimental procedures on my patients?	Never: 57% Sometimes: 31% Always: 12%	Never: 45% Sometimes: 45% Always: 10%	Never: 49% Sometimes: 37% Always: 14%	Never: 40% Sometimes: 41% Always: 19%	Never: 38% Sometimes: 45% Always: 17%	0.182
If patient wants expensive 'unsuitable' treatment, I will do it?	Never: 48% Sometimes: 30% Always: 22%	Never: 31% Sometimes: 52% Always: 17%	Never: 44% Sometimes: 40% Always: 16%	Never: 38% Sometimes: 41% Always: 21%	Never: 45% Sometimes: 38% Always: 17%	0.321
Explain the side effects and cost details of procedure before I start?	Never: 16% Sometimes: 32% Always: 52%	Never: 3% Sometimes: 38% Always: 59%	Never: 6% Sometimes: 23% Always: 71%	Never: 2% Sometimes: 38% Always: 60%	Never: 2% Sometimes: 31% Always: 67%	0.000

Inform the patient about long duration of treatment in dental school?	Never: 23%	Never: 5%	Never: 4%	Never: 2%	Never: 3%	0.000
	Sometimes: 29%	Sometimes: 45%	Sometimes: 32%	Sometimes: 40%	Sometimes: 30%	
	Always: 47%	Always: 50%	Always: 64%	Always: 58%	Always: 67%	
I need more information on dental ethics?	Yes: 58%	Yes: 53%	Yes: 61%	Yes: 54%	Yes: 56%	0.286
	Maybe: 27%	Maybe: 36%	Maybe: 27%	Maybe: 40%	Maybe: 38%	
	No: 15%	No: 11%	No: 12%	No: 6%	No: 6%	

DISCUSSION

Professional conduct is considered to be an essential component of successful and trustworthy dental practice. Dental students are trained by exposing them to patients with challenging cases. They also have to deal with the requirements in order to fulfill the dental curriculum needs (Leadbeatter and Peck, 2017). Therefore, it was imperative for us to determine the ethical sensitivity of dental students in different clinical levels.

When compared the responses among male and female dental students, it was interesting to observe that 34% - 43% of the respondents were not sure about what ethics meant, how ethics is important in running a dental practice and emphasis on patients' satisfaction over clinical requirement. Similar responses were recorded when inquired about informing the patient about clinical mishap and performing experimental procedures on the patients. This is an area of concern as far as patients' safety and dentist's professionalism are in consideration.

Educating students about the above-mentioned issues may help in improving their knowledge and therefore the ethical values when running their dental practice in the future. Male students were seen to be more inclined towards money as they seem to agree to perform procedures for willing patients even if the treatment did not suit him/her. On the other hand, female students tend to exhibit a higher amount of empathy towards their patients. This has also been demonstrated by Aggarwal et al (2016), when they discovered statistically significant differences in various subgroups thus measuring the empathy.

Contrary to the majority of insignificant results mentioned above, we found some statistically significant results among various levels of dental students. We were not able to decide whether the ethical sensitivity decreased or increased over the period of dental education as level 8, as well as level 12 students showed higher scores in dealing with ethical dilemmas during their clinical practice.

To sum up, it is very important that we expose the dental students to ethics and related courses in each level of dentistry so that their professional standards can receive a push during the beginning of every semester. Every now and then students are found to have ignored the importance of ethics in their clinical requirement, even if it has to do something with providing insufficient information to the patient or prioritizing their points over patient's satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

- Females tend to show better empathy and professional standards as compared to males.
- Although no clear winner was decided (since all levels showed varying responses for each question) among the different levels of dentistry, educating students in each semester about ethical considerations may improve their overall knowledge and attitude towards their practice.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

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