

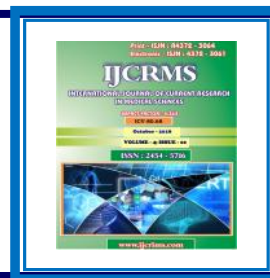


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Bioethical Awareness in Indian Medical Scenario

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Abstract

Objective: To Study Bioethical awareness among graduates and post-graduates at Sri Guru Ram Das University of Medical Sciences and Research, Amritsar, Punjab, India.

Methodology: The study was carried out in the campus of Sri Guru Ram Das University of Medical Sciences and Research, Amritsar. It was a questionnaire based survey.

Results: The Majority of students had better understanding of Bioethical issues as 86.6% students were familiar with the term 'Bioethics'. The fact that students at this level of education were eager to know more about bioethics was concluded on the basis that 80% of students had the opinion that bioethics should be regularly taught in the class. There was a general agreement among the respondents that the Government policies and the bioethical issues were not satisfactory and needed more thought and discussions. The survey indicated that cloning, organ donation, abortion and stem cell technology as the most important bioethical issues.

Conclusion: Colleges, Universities should include bioethics in their curriculums and more and more awareness needs to be created among the general public through conferences and discussions.

Keywords: Bioethics, Organ donation, Cloning, Stem cell Technology, Abortion.

Introduction

Sri Guru Ram Das University of Medical Sciences and Research is located in Amritsar, Punjab, India. It has around 25 academic departments along with a strength of about 1000 on campus students.

Advances in bio science and medical technologies have extended and enriched human lives by curing a range of diseases. These changes have triggered a new set of ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, organ transplant, standards of death, stem cell research and gene diagnosis, which cannot be solely addressed by traditional ethics. Against this background, the idea of biomedical ethics has emerged as a new form of ethics for humans to embrace in the bio science era that started in the 1960s. Bioethics should be handled as 'values' or an 'outlook' that constitute an essential part of different life conflicts and choices, including death issues, rather than being merely confined to physical or medical situations. In particular, it is critical for undergraduate and postgraduate students, the future leaders of society, to receive a proper biomedical ethics education. These students belong to youth hood, a period marked by the formation of conscience and the establishment of identity and values. They may be grown-ups in body and mind, but in reality their values are yet to be established, making them susceptible to both manipulation and education. Therefore, teaching them biomedical ethics at this age will be much more effective than during any other period of their lives. Besides, youth is closely linked with a number of biomedical ethics issues, such as suicide, artificial termination of pregnancy, and organ donation. However, today's Indian ethics education does not cover current social issues in depth, while people are inundated with insufficient, inaccurate information and data from TV and Internet media outlets. This may be damaging to ethical thinking and to the promotion of proper bioethics. It is tremendously important to prepare undergraduate students to form a proper perception and sense of responsibilities in relation to biomedical ethics, as those students will eventually lead the next generation.

In light of the above, this study was aimed at assessing the awareness levels of undergraduate and postgraduate students with respect to biomedical ethics, and laying the groundwork for the directions and contents of an ethics education which is needed to raise the proper awareness of biomedical ethics in undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The advent of various modern techniques has raised many questions on the moral values and ethics of the mankind. Various techniques for example, Recombinant DNA technology, gene therapy, cloning, organ donation, stem cell technology has not only raised the quality of life but has some serious implications as far as ethics goes, a concern which has received very little attention by the medical pioneers. Bioethics is a term defined as the study of ethical issues in terms of Medical Sciences and Biotechnology. The term 'Bioethics' was coined in 1926 by Fritz Jahr in an article about a "bioethical imperative" regarding the use of animals and plants in scientific research. But it was Van Rensselaer who laid the foundation for global ethics, a discipline centred around the link between biology, ecology, medicine and human values. Bioethics, with all the values it represents in the field of medicine also faces some criticism in terms of lack of diversity in thought. Bioethics, in today's world has become the most hot topic for discussion nowadays and thousands of discussions on various journals is a proof of that. The Indian Journal of Medical Ethics is one such platform in the country where all the discussions take place on the topic of Bioethics.

Methodology

The study was a descriptive study conducted in the department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology among the undergraduates and postgraduates where a questionnaire consisting of 13 questions was distributed 30 students. The questionnaire was created by the authors and some trained students and was validated by the college's ethical committee. The research variables used were 'yes' or 'no' in most of the questions. The data was analysed using the SPSS program version 18.0.

Results

All the 30 students who were questioned came forward and contributed to the cause and responded to the questionnaire. **63.33%** students reported that Science and Technology had a good impact on the society. **86.6%** of students were familiar with the term Bioethics while 80% of the respondents were of the opinion that bioethics should regularly be taught in the class. Many students (**73.3%**) were aware about the genetically engineered crops and agreed for their consumption as long as they posed no threat to environment and health. Majority of students (**96.6%**) believed that organ donation as the important topic on bioethics and the need for the Government to efficiently regularise the process to save millions of lives. **96.6%** of students were willing to donate their own kidney to their respective fathers if the need arises and in case of non-match of kidney **60%** of students were willing to buy the kidney from the black market while **40%** of the respondents opposed the idea. In response to the question that whether India should allow cloning or not, **56.6%** were in favour while **43.3%** were against the idea. Most of the students (**70%**) were against the idea of free abortion in India except for specific reasons such as danger to the mother or an abnormal fetus.

Discussion

From the above study it is pretty obvious that undergraduate and postgraduate students feel the need that Bioethics should be a part of the curriculum right from the very beginning. It has become quintessential that bioethical and medical ethical knowledge should be inculcated in the budding physicians and surgeons right from when they begin the care. Bioethics not only just includes the ethical issues associated. With various procedures but it also includes patient-doctor relationship; doctor-doctor relationship; duties of a doctor towards the state and duties of a doctor in case of an emergency.

A very important incident which really ignited the debate on bioethics was the case of Aruna Shanbaug a nurse from KEM Hospital, Mumbai

was sexually assaulted and was forced to stay in a vegetative state for 43 years whereas her assailant was sentenced to a mere imprisonment of 14 years just because Aruna was not dead. Aruna eventually died of a hospital acquired pneumonia but her assailant led a normal life after serving his sentence. But this ignited a debate on whether India should legalise passive euthanasia or not and would passive euthanasia have served justice in this case or not?

The debate on these questions is still underway and only correct knowledge about the ethical implications of euthanasia can help end this debate.

Even today a rape victim has to tolerate innumerable atrocities and harassment to undergo a medical termination of pregnancy whereas MTP is legal under humanitarian grounds under MTP Act 1971. This clearly shows that even the health care professionals are unaware of certain ethical issues, a problem which can only be solved by educating students right from the beginning.

If we look at the organ donation scenario in the country, patients are more inclined to buy an organ from the black market rather than applying for it legally. This black market of organ donation has turned into a vicious circle involving human trafficking rackets. This can be stopped by educating both the public and health care professionals about the legal obligation related to organ donation. The government can also assist by organising organ donation camps and allowing free organ donation.

All this can be made possible by having correct and sufficient bioethical knowledge which can be made possible by education and education alone.

Conclusion

Thus it can be concluded that awareness regarding Bioethical issues is fairly high among the undergraduates and postgraduates of Sri Guru Ram Das University of Medical Sciences and Research. However, the awareness level among the general public may not be as good as among

the medical students. Therefore, there is a need to educate the people about various new technologies in the field of medicine and their associated Bioethical issues. The Government should also formulate clear laws, policies and rules through open debate and after consulting the specialists in the respective field.

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