Understanding Medical Students’ Beliefs on Abortion and Sexual Reproduction

Maria Jarkowiec MSIII, Seema Kakar MD, Julia Frank MD, Gisela Butera MLIS
The George Washington University, School of Medicine and Health Sciences

Abstract

BACKGROUND: As a controversial topic in American society, abortion occupies a precarious place in medical school curricula. Although medical students believe abortion is a valid and acceptable topic, fewer than 20% of U.S. medical schools offer formal abortion education in either the pre-clinical or clinical years. Only 40% provide abortion lectures during clerkships.

According to the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics, student learning objectives, abortion education should be included at a minimum in the third year core clerkship. In the absence of published curricula, health professional schools must develop their own methods to teach the medical aspects of the subject, while respecting all points of view.

PURPOSE: This research presents a reproducible structure for addressing both medical and ethical considerations in educating pre-clinical students about abortion.

Methods

ETHICS: Second year medical students enrolled in Practice of Medicine, Problem Oriented Case-Based Learning (PCL) attended a required ethics lecture, during which they used an audience response system to answer questions. Their answers were tabulated to measure the range of student opinions. Students were then invited to post questions to the library blog.

SAMPLE CLICKER QUESTION: Is there a difference between a fatal disease and aborting a fetus?

SAMPLE BLOG QUESTIONS: Do you have any idea about what percentage of OB/GYN physicians are trained to provide abortions? Can OB/GYN residents opt in or out of this training?

Are there any legal provisions relating to physicians who provide misleading information to patients seeking abortions?

CASE-BASED/SMALL GROUP: Over the next three weeks, students in established small groups discussed a case that illustrated reproductive decision-making.

RESULTS: Survey

SURVEY RESULTS: At the end of the case, 140 students completed the survey, and 112 consented to have their responses analyzed for research purposes.

DISCUSSION BOARD: All identifiers were removed from the Blackboard postings and content was coded to identify themes and subthemes. Major themes included physician responsibilities, unbiased information, and abortion laws. A constant theme that emerged was students’ acknowledgment of the complexity of abortion as a medical topic and the ethical dilemmas that physicians face.

Results: Blog

DISCUSSION BOARD CODED THEMES

Access to Care
Medical Decision
Abortion Law
Medical Doctor Autonomy
Abortion Provider
Mother v. Fetus
Complicated Issue
Open Discussion Beneficial
Counseling a Patient
Patient Autonomy
Evidence in the Literature
Physician’s Responsibility
Holistic Care
Roe v Wade

RESULTS: Focus Group

FOCUS GROUP: Third year students were recruited to participate in a focus group discussion to reflect on the relevance and utility of the PCL case for the OB/GYN clerkship.

CONCLUSION: Case based learning, a framing lecture, and a safe place to express and challenge opinions together constitute an effective strategy for introducing a controversial topic in medical education.

FUTURE: We plan to implement the same curriculum next year and will conduct a similar survey and focus group to assess the stability of these results.

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References

