
ORIGINAL RESEARCH—EDUCATION

German Medical Students' Interest in and Knowledge about Human Sexuality in 1972 and 2012

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. During the 1970s, a growing number of medical schools began to recognize the importance of medical education concerning human sexuality. Currently, most medical schools provide at least some instruction in human sexuality.

Aim. In light of this development, the present study aimed to compare the interest in and knowledge about human sexuality of medical students from two different time periods.

Methods. The answers to a self-constructed questionnaire of 236 students in 1972 were compared with those of 259 students in 2012. Students were asked whether they were interested in education regarding human sexuality and which specific topics they felt should be included in the medical curriculum. The students' knowledge in the following domains was assessed: sexual development, sexual behavior, sexual physiology and psychology, and sexual medicine.

Main Outcome Measures. The two cohorts were compared with regard to those specific sexuality-related topics in which the students were most and least interested in. Furthermore, the number of correct responses to the knowledge questions was compared.

Results. While in 1972, 99.2% of the students were interested in medical education about human sexuality, in 2012, 80.3% showed an interest. The connection of disorders from different medical disciplines with sexuality was rated as most interesting by both the students from 1972 and 2012. Medical students from 2012 gave 50.3% correct answers to the knowledge questions, whereas students from 1972 correctly answered 46.3% of the questions.

Conclusions. Although interest in education concerning human sexuality has decreased, the majority of students view it as an important topic. Nevertheless, medical students still lack knowledge about important aspects of human sexuality (e.g., psychosexual development and relative safety of different contraceptives). Therefore, more time should be dedicated to education concerning human sexuality and its cultural, societal, and health aspects in particular. **Turner D, Jopt K, Nieder TO, and Briken P. German medical students' interest in and knowledge about human sexuality in 1972 and 2012. J Sex Med 2014;11:1914–1926.**

Key Words. Human Sexuality; Medical Education; Medical Students; Sexual Health; Sex Education

Introduction

Partly triggered by the public sexual revolution in the 1960s, but also influenced by Masters and Johnson's work on the physiology of sexual functioning, the medical sciences have come to

recognize more and more the importance of human sexuality within medical practice and subsequently also within medical training [1–4]. Today, statements released for example by the World Health Organization or the U.S. National Institute of Health claim that sexual health is inevitably related to physical and psychological well-being, and thus healthcare professionals should have at least some knowledge regarding human sexuality [5–9]. Patients have, however,

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repeatedly reported that their healthcare providers only infrequently address their sexual problems and needs. Consistent with this is the finding that medical professionals themselves regularly feel embarrassed and uncomfortable when addressing sexuality-related issues [10–12]. Furthermore, studies assessing medical students' knowledge concerning human sexuality have repeatedly shown that students lack knowledge in some important areas [3,13–16]. Although the students usually perform quite well in questions concerning contraception, basic sexual physiology, and sexually transmitted diseases, they seem to have less knowledge and some false convictions especially concerning homosexuality, transgenderism and gender dysphoria, female sexual organs and the female orgasm, as well as sexuality in the elderly [13,15–19]. Both medical professionals and medical students have argued that their lack of competence when addressing sexual concerns and providing related health care for their patients is a result of a lack of theoretical and practical education during their medical training [18].

However, the development of medical education programs concerning human sexuality and sexual health during the last 50 years can be described as rather positive. Whereas in 1964, only two medical schools in the United States offered courses in human sexuality and marriage counseling, approximately 10 years later this number had risen to 95% of all U.S. medical schools [20,21]. The number of hours of instruction was mostly between 10 and 30 with a median of 21 hours per semester [21]. Today, between 88% and 95% of medical schools in the United States and Canada offer courses in human sexuality as part of their core curriculum [22,23]. Although there has been a notable improvement within medical training programs in relation to sexual health education in North America, almost 70% of medical schools offer less than 10 hours of education in human sexuality [22,23].

In Europe, so far very few studies have assessed the amount of education offered with regard to human sexuality. A study conducted in 1971 in West Germany including West Berlin showed that 30% of all German medical schools provided instruction in female sexuality with an average of 3.2 hours per semester [24]. Current studies have found that 22 of the 23 medical schools (95.7%) in the United Kingdom offered at least some instruction in human sexuality, and 17 schools (73.9%) taught relevant communication skills for taking a sexual history [25,26]. However, only four schools

within the United Kingdom dedicated more than 10 hours to instruction in human sexuality [25,26]. Seen in relation to the important role sexuality plays in everyone's life, the number of hours used for medical education on sexual health seems to be disproportionately low.

Aim

In light of the decrease in classroom hours dedicated to human sexuality over the past 40 years, studies assessing the usefulness of this development are clearly needed. As previous research has not used the same instruments and questionnaires, the comparability of these studies is limited, especially if they were conducted in different decades. In order to overcome this limitation, it was the aim of the present study to evaluate and compare the interest in and actual knowledge concerning different areas of human sexuality of medical students who studied at a metropolitan German University Medical Center in the years of 1972 and 2012. Exactly the same questionnaire was used at both time points. This study and its unique assessment method provided the opportunity to first of all assess the level of general interest in human sexuality education as well as whether the sexuality-related topics in which medical students are interested have changed. Second, differences between the two cohorts with regard to their overall amount of knowledge or their amount of knowledge in specific areas could be investigated. These comparisons could thus provide evidence that is either in support of or disproves a decrease in teaching hours on the subject of human sexuality.

Method

Education in Human Sexuality at the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf (UKE) in 1972 and 2012

In Germany, the structure of medical studies is based on the *Aerztliche Approbationsordnung* (AepprO; medical licensing regulations), a law that is passed by the German Federal Ministry of Health. The AepprO defines the general framework of medical studies at German universities, including such aspects as minimum study duration, the content and type of lectures and seminars, and the number of national examinations to be taken throughout the course of the studies. All versions of the AepprO have defined the minimum study duration as being 6 years, divided into the preclini-

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