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Implementation of an online ethics course into a pharmacy curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Background and purpose: To evaluate students' ethical reasoning skills after implementation of a series of online modules containing ethical content.
Educational activity and setting: A four-module online ethics series was created and embedded in the learning management system of a second-year pharmacy skills lab course. The Defining Issues Test Version 2 (DIT-2) was administered before and after completion of the ethics module series. Results of the DIT-2 were used to evaluate the impact of the modules on students' ethical thinking ability. An optional written survey utilizing Likert-scale questions was administered at the end of the study to assess students' perceptions of the course.
Findings: A total of 134 students were enrolled in this study. After removal of voluntary exclusions and unreliable data, 107 DIT-2 tests were evaluated. The study failed to demonstrate a statistically significant increase in pre- and posttest DIT-2 scores. Student scores were higher than other pharmacy students' scores that were previously reported in the literature. Thirty-four (26.1%) students participated in the optional survey. The results demonstrated perceived value of the online ethics series, with students indicating improved understanding, confidence, and ability to consider other perspectives when dealing with medical ethical dilemmas.
Summary: Implementing an online ethics series into a pharmacy curriculum failed to produce statistically significant increases in ethical thinking ability as measured by the DIT-2. However, students indicated a benefit from participating in the course as evidenced by responses to a post-course survey.

Background and purpose

A professional is one who demonstrates structural and attitudinal traits that align with the ethical attributes of a profession and its members.[1] To help pharmacists achieve these specific behaviors, resources such as the Oath of a Pharmacist[2] and the Code of Ethics for Pharmacists[3] are utilized by schools of pharmacy in creating their curricula. These pledges highlight the importance of improving

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patient outcomes and advancing patient care.[2] However, beyond practicing to the best of one's clinical abilities, pharmacists also take an oath to embody the highest standards of the profession's principles as they pertain to legal, moral, and ethical issues.[2] Similarly, the Code of Ethics characterizes the roles and responsibilities of pharmacists as they relate to moral obligations and virtues.[3]

To be successful as future professionals, it is essential that student pharmacists are well versed in these structural resources. While a student may typically think of metrics such as grade point average and standardized test scores as the best measures of future success, clinical performance has been more closely related to attributes of ethical reasoning.[4,5] Ethical reasoning, as defined by Wesleyan University,[6] is the ability to identify, assess, and develop ethical arguments from a variety of ethical positions. Moral reasoning, although similar, is a cognitive decision-making process based on cognitive moral decision-making capabilities, developed over time and exposure to several elements. Ethical reasoning derives its basis from ethical principles such as justice, non-maleficence, beneficence, and autonomy, whereas moral reasoning may be more subject to influence from an individual's exposure to elements such as personal experience and culture.

To ensure that student pharmacists excel clinically and practice in an ethical manner, a comprehensive doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) curriculum should incorporate topics regarding professionalism and ethical reasoning as a requirement.[7,8] The Center for the Advancement of Pharmacy Education (CAPE) Outcomes require that pharmacy students are taught to administer patient-centered care in a way that obeys the legal and ethical requirements of the profession while maintaining compassion for the patient.[9] Additionally, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) requires that the didactic portion of PharmD curricula includes ethics, a topic that falls under social, administrative and behavioral sciences.[8] Students should be able to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas that may arise during patient care.[8] The Virginia Commonwealth University School of Pharmacy (VCU SOP) instructs their students to uphold specific Attributes of Professionalism,[9] one of which requires students to adhere to ethical standards. Furthermore, statements related to ethical standards of pharmacists can often be found on the websites of international schools of pharmacy. From the University of Alberta to the University of Malta, ensuring students and graduates act within a professional code of ethics is a global value of many pharmacy schools.

Despite the prerequisite of ethics in PharmD programs, literature published in the last 13 years has suggested that pharmacy students' ethical reasoning skills may be less developed in comparison to other health professional students. A survey published in 2004 suggested that pharmacy students are not as ethically developed as students from other healthcare disciplines.[10] Furthermore, despite additional years of education, pharmacy students did not progress in their ability to ethically reason from the first to third professional year.[10] A study published in 2011 indicated that pharmacy students were found to have the lowest empathy scores among medicine, dentistry, veterinary medicine, and nursing students during their first year of training[11]; moreover, these scores changed very little upon completion of their first year.[11] According to Nash,[12] empathy is an essential element of moral behavior and ethics. This information paired with the fact that VCU SOP has received feedback from students describing a lack of ethical training in the current curriculum makes it clear that more can be done to encourage the development of empathic and ethical reasoning skills among pharmacy students.

Other schools and colleges of pharmacy have addressed these deficiencies in a variety of ways including the implementation of intra- and interprofessional electives and courses, debate workshops, and case-based activities.[13–17] While these studies all had favorable results regarding the integration of ethics into the pharmacy curricula, they did not use validated assessment tools to measure improvements in ethical reasoning skills among pharmacy students. As a result, VCU SOP faculty implemented a four-module online ethics training series to provide ethical reasoning education to second-year pharmacy students.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of an online ethics series in improving pharmacy students' ethical thinking ability, to compare the Defining Issues Test Version 2 (DIT-2) scores of second-year pharmacy students to other pharmacy students and students from other healthcare disciplines, and to assess the students' views of the training series.

Educational activity and setting

A four-module online ethics training series was created and implemented within an existing one-credit course (PHAR 535: Foundations IV) in spring 2016. This course is required within the second-year pharmacy students' curriculum. Prior to this training series, students had only received one hour-long lecture related to ethics. The students had approximately two weeks to complete each module, and each module was designed to be completed in approximately 20–30 minutes. Following the completion of each module, there was a 15 minutes in-class debriefing session in which students were given the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings on the concepts or dilemmas presented. To ensure that students actively participated in the modules, the training series accounted for 10% of the students' course grade.

The first module required students to read a journal article related to ethical training in pharmacy.[10] Upon reading the article, students were tasked with writing a 300- to 500-word reflective essay that addressed one or more of the findings noted in the article and how it affected them as a student pharmacist. All essays were graded using a standardized rubric that assessed the assignment's completeness, depth of reflection, structure, and grammar.

The second module was comprised of an online lecture that defined medical ethics and summarized the four primary ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, and justice and an online lecture then illustrated the three levels of moral reasoning described by Kohlberg's Theory of Ethical Development.[18] Interactive, non-graded quizzes were included within the presentation to keep students engaged and assess their comprehension of the content. After viewing the presentation, students were required to complete a five-question online quiz to evaluate their understanding of the material.

The third and fourth modules were interactive online lectures that outlined ethical dilemmas a pharmacist may face in practice. The third module focused on an ethical dilemma a pharmacist may encounter in the community setting wherein a patient is trying to

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