Attitudes and Awareness of Ethics and Medico – Legal Aspects among Dental Professionals: A Cross – Sectional Study


ABSTRACT

Introduction: Legal and ethical considerations are an integral aspects of dental practice in planning health care of the patient. It is imperative to study the awareness among health care providers with regards to medico-legal issues as this will be reflected in the quality of care of patients and health outcomes. Therefore, health professionals should familiarize themselves with laws and regulations that concern their practice. In order to develop one’s own professional identity, it is very important to understand the nature of these obligations and fulfill them to the best of their ability. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to elucidate knowledge, attitude, awareness, and practice of dental professionals in relation to health care ethics and laws. Materials & methods: The present study is a cross-sectional study which was carried out in Hyderabad, and Sangareddy using a prevalidated close ended questionnaire. A questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was framed and randomly distributed to 400 individuals in person and through e – forms, of which 323 responded. Results: Chi-Square was used to find the significance of awareness, attitude, and practice among groups their knowledge regarding informed consent and medico-legal aspects. When it came to consumer protection act and method of filing a case, their knowledge was minimal. Conclusion: An educational program would be useful to increase the understanding and confidence of dentists in any medico-legal aspects. Therefore, present study points to the need for appropriate training to sensitize individuals regarding these issues.

KEYWORDS: Awareness, Copra, Ethics, Informed Consent, Medico-Legal

INTRODUCTION

Legal and ethical considerations are an integral aspects of dental practice in planning health care of the patient. It is imperative to study the awareness among health care providers with regards to medico-legal issues as this will be reflected in the quality of care of patients and health outcomes. Increased awareness of human rights, increasing use of technology, changing moral principles held doctors in different difficulties in many aspects from daily practice.

Informed Consent has formed an integral part of patient treatment and management, examination of patient to diagnose, treatment without his/her consent accounts to assault in law, even if its beneficial and even dentist may be charged for negligence if he/she fails to give required information regarding the particular procedure before obtaining his/her consent. Nowadays, there is an increased trend of medical litigation by the unsatisfied patients against doctors. This is an issue of concern. So, training about the nature and impact of medico-legal matters are important in improving the quality of care and thereby strengthening the trust patients have in them.

Therefore, health professionals should familiarize themselves with laws and regulations that concern their practice. In order to develop one’s own professional identity, it is very important to understand the nature of these obligations and fulfill them to the best of their ability.

With this background, the present study is an attempt to elucidate knowledge, attitude, awareness, and practice of dental professionals in relation to health care ethics and laws.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design: The present study is a cross-sectional study which was carried out in Hyderabad, and Sangareddy using a prevalidated closed ended questionnaire to assess the attitude and awareness of ethics and medico-legal aspects among dental professionals.

Data collection: A prevalidated close ended questionnaire consisting of 15 questions was framed and distributed randomly to 400 individuals in person and through e – forms, of which 323 responded. They were assured for the confidentiality of their answers. Their
Statistical analysis: The recovered questionnaires were arranged and coded before entering into the datasheet. The chart was prepared using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using Statistical analysis software. Chi-Square was used to find the significance of awareness, attitude, and practices regarding medico-legal issues and need to improve their knowledge, this study provides an insight into awareness of medico-legal standard of practice within the community.

RESULTS

A total of 400 participants with a response rate of 80.75%. The majority of participants were holding a master’s degree, 51.1% (n=165), and 48.9%(n=158) were holding a bachelor’s degree. The answers to the questions have been mentioned in Table No.1.

![Statistical analysis](image)

**Table No.1: Questionnaire.** P value<0.05 significant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s.no</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>BDS</th>
<th>MDS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Chi-square test</th>
<th>P – value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Do you take informed consent from patient? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>1.242</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Do you feel informed consent is necessary for every patient? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The purpose of consent form is to protect? a. Doctor b. Patient c. Both</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>5.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Do you consider it to be legal to furnish records on demand without patient consent? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Do you give detailed explanation of procedures and complications associated with it? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Do you know what COPRA (consumer protection act ) is? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>0.745</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Do you know whom to contact in case you are filed under COPRA? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>When you are under court of law i.e, filed under COPRA, can you practice? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Not attending a patient during emergency is a punishable act? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Medical negligence comes under? a.) Civil Act b.)Criminal Act c.)Consumer Protection Act d.) All of the above</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Dentist is responsible for the act of negligence? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Do you think you are Liable to the patient for negligence for non – referral if the planned treatment is beyond your skill? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Do you consider advertising whether directly or indirectly for the purpose of obtaining patients or promoting his own professional advantage is unethical? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Do you consider it to be legal to furnish records on demand without patient consent? 1. DO YES 2. NO</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>what do you think is the best way to update your knowledge regarding medicolegal issues? a.)CDE programme b.) any certification course</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

Law and medical ethics aim at safeguarding a good standard of practice within the community. The result of this study provides an insight into awareness of medico-legal issues and need to improve their knowledge, attitude, and practices regarding medico-legal issues.

Most of the participants were in the third decade of their life; this is similar to another study done by Hariharan, where the majority of the respondents were in this age range, reflecting that more young doctors are there at the workplace in different specialties and ranks.

The guidelines on informed consent have been issued by The Supreme Court of India. According to that, before starting any treatment, a doctor must ask for and secure the consent of the patient. The consent obtained should comprise the nature and method of the treatment, and the rationale, benefits and outcome, any alternative treatment...
if available, knowledge of the considerable risks, and the unfavorable consequences of denying treatment. For legal suits, preservation of judicial records is necessary for a minimum of 2 years in consumer cases (The CPA, 1986) and 3 years in civil cases with no time limit in criminal cases.6

Almost all of the respondents believed that informed consent is required prior to any procedure; auxiliary studies reported similar findings.7 8 In our study, approximately 86.1% of the dental professionals take consent from the patients prior to the start of any procedure, which is almost similar to the study conducted by Senthi in which 88.5% take informed consent. 9 whereas 63.3% took informed consent in a study conducted by vijayalakshi,9 86.1%, which is less as compared to the findings in a study by Sumanth. 92.9% feel informed consent to be necessary for every patient, which is similar to the study conducted by senthi10. Implying more individuals feel it to be necessary when compared to results of study done by vijayalakshi, which is 52.3%.9

The current study, demonstrated that 84.8% of individuals think the purpose of the consent form is to protect both doctor and patient. 14.2% is to protect the doctor and 0.9% to protect patient, which is, in contrast, to the study conducted by Vijay lakshmi where only 27.3% feel the purpose is to protect both doctor and patient, and more than half 70.4% think it to protect the doctor, and 2.3% to protect patient.9 Study by Senthi, only 49.1% think it to be both and 22.9% to protect the doctor and 28% protecting patient.7

90.1% give a detailed explanation about the procedures and complications, which is less when compared to study by Senthil wherein it is 100%. 68.7% in the present study are aware about consumer protection act (copra) whereas only 11.4% in a study conducted by Senthil is aware of copra10 and also elders (n = 117) were much more aware of copra in the present study when compared to younger individuals (n=105) which are in accordance to study conducted by Singh k et al. in Udaipur.10 In contrast, study conducted by Radhika revealed that younger practitioners are knowledgeable about CPA in comparison to senior.11

More than half of the individuals do not know whom to contact when they are filed under copra act, and 60.4% are not aware that they can practice when they are under the court of law, which is not in accordance with the study conducted by senthi.7

More than 80% of the respondents agreed that carelessly leaving objects in the operation site and not attending a patient during an emergency, no referral of patient if an emergency, no referral of patient if available, knowledge of the considerable risks, and the unfavorable consequences of denying treatment. For legal suits, preservation of judicial records is necessary for a minimum of 2 years in consumer cases (The CPA, 1986) and 3 years in civil cases with no time limit in criminal cases.6

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More than 80% of the respondents agreed that carelessly leaving objects in the operation site and not attending a patient during an emergency, no referral of patient if planned treatment is beyond their skill are punishable act.12

More than half of the individuals were aware of ethics, and medico-legal issues, and continuing dental education (CDE) programs are recommended to update the knowledge regarding them.

CONCLUSION

The participants in the study have knowledge regarding informed consent and medico-legal aspects, but when it comes to method of filing a case, copra (Consumer protection act) their knowledge was minimal. Considering the present scenario, a better understanding of CPA is necessary for dentists to be on the safer side. An educational program would be useful to increase the understanding and confidence of dentists in any medico-legal aspects. Therefore, present study points to the need for appropriate training to sensitize individuals regarding these issues.

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