

Perception of studying dental law and ethics among postgraduate dental students in the UK

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IN BRIEF

- Highlights the importance of integrating students' understanding into course design and development.
- Introduces a new postgraduate course in dental law and ethics to the average reader.
- Provides a deeper understanding of students' perception of studying a new topic as dental law and ethics.

Law and ethics is an integral part of medical and dental professional practice. The subject is touched upon in the undergraduate curriculum. Historically, dentists interested in postgraduate study in this subject have accessed courses on medical law and ethics. While there are areas of shared interest (for example, consent, confidentiality) there are differences in emphasis and content (for example, end of life care, organ transplants, etc) which are not relevant to dentistry. A new postgraduate certificate (PgCert) course was approved by the University of Bedfordshire designed specifically for dental practitioners, making it the only university accredited course in the UK that is specific to dental staff. Students' perception of the subject of dental law and ethics at a postgraduate level was not known. The first PgCert student cohort was assessed at the start and the end of the course using two questionnaires. Sixteen students, all qualified dental practitioners working in the UK, took part. The perception toward the subject of dental law and ethics was in-line with the current guideline and regulations governing the dental profession. Perception of dental law was clearer at the end of the course compared to the beginning while dental ethics remained a challenging subject.

INTRODUCTION

The subject of law and ethics is an integral part of medical and dental professional practice.^{1,2} For dental students, among the General Dental Council (GDC) standards³ for dentists is to be trustworthy, put patients' interest first and maintain professional knowledge and competencies. Teaching law and ethics for dental students takes place at an undergraduate (UG) level, in the GDC's 'first five years' document,⁴ it states that the learning outcomes required for registration with the GDC as a professional body includes 'understanding the broader issues of dental practice, including ethics, medico-legal considerations, management, and the maintenance of a safe working environment', however, students are only required to be familiar with rather than be competent or have knowledge of the subject in their UG years.

At the moment, more than twice as many claims are made against dentists in comparison to doctors in the UK. Hearings before

the GDC have gone from only ten days of hearings a year in 2000 to 1,200 days in 2013. As the numbers of claims and complaints increased almost fourfold since 2001,⁵ a deeper understanding of dental law and ethics is paramount to dental practitioners. It is a critical time for dental practitioners and their teams to address all issues surrounding dental law and ethics in a changing culture, with increasing demands and expectations from patients about their dental treatment and care. The University of Bedfordshire is the only university in the UK that is currently providing a postgraduate certificate (PgCert) specifically to study dental law and ethics. The course was planned, designed and approved in 2012 with the author as the course lead, and the first student cohort started in October 2012. Students' perception of the subject at a postgraduate level was not known and was needed to assist in the continuous development of this course which prompted this action research. The aim of this paper is to provide a snapshot of the perception towards studying dental law and ethics at a PG level and whether this perception changes throughout the course for this small group of students.

A taster day was hosted by the department of Clinical Education and Leadership on the subject of dental law and ethics in the summer of 2012 before the start of the course.

The taster day was a stand-alone training day to dental practitioners and also acted as a promotion for the course. Students verbally expressed their views about the subject and their perception was that the subject was not covered in a clear way during their undergraduate years. This presented the need that initiated this research.

METHODS

Students were invited to complete a five minute questionnaire on their first contact day of the course. All data were anonymous. The cohort consisted of 16 students (four female and 12 male) who all took part in the study and all had no previous PG education on the subject of medical law and ethics. The cohort consisted of qualified dental practitioners who work in private and/or NHS based dental practice apart from one student who worked for a dental defence organisation. Some students were also working as dental trainers working with newly qualified dentists. The age of participants ranged between 30 and 63 years old.

Participants were asked why they were taking part in studying dental law and ethics and asked to select a relevant answer from five different choices. Participants were also asked to select five words to answer the question 'what does the term dental law mean to you?' and the same question with regards to dental ethics. Data was

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then analysed to look at the selection pattern among the group. There were 25 words available to choose from for dental law and 20 words for dental ethics. For dental law, the selection was from a randomly arranged set of words/phrases and included terms that reflected uncertainty, for example, confusing, fog, unclear and terms that represented firm boundaries, for example, regulations, rules, GDC standard, binding. There were also terms that dealt with positive and negative emotions, for example, fear, freedom, guilt, success, indifferent.

For dental ethics, the terms to choose from also covered negative and positive emotions and clarity and uncertainty. Additionally, there were terms to reflect ideas, for example, communication, religious impact, beliefs and personality.

The method chosen to understand students' perception by selecting certain terms from a pool of words was designed to see the links between dental law and ethics and the preselected terms. Different methods are used in the literature with different emphasis on multiple choice selection or ranking in scale different answers.⁶⁻⁸ Word association method is also well documented in the literature to look at users' perception⁹⁻¹¹ and used in areas of psychology research. The selected method in this presented research is a combination of these methods to understand participants' perception with regards to the subject. The aim is not to measure the response time in finding associated words - as per psychology research to find hidden meanings - nor to rank or place words in order. It is simply a way to allow participants a choice in their selection, with the hypothesis that given the choice of a wide range of terms and/or words, each participant will be usually spontaneously drawn to a selection that reflects his or her views and/or opinion. Research has also shown that there are associations between people's personalities and their use of language.^{12,13}

RESULTS

The results showed that almost all participants (14 out of 16 students) were interested in the subject of dental law and ethics and that was the reason for enrolling on this PG course. Only one student had a bad experience with issues relating to law and ethics in their dental practice and selected that particular reason for doing the course. Another student selected the fact that obtaining a PG degree was the motive for taking part in the course.

When the questionnaire was initially conducted, the term 'GDC standard' was the most commonly selected term with regards to views on dental law. It was selected

12 times followed by the word 'regulations' (selected 11 times). The words 'obligation', 'safety', 'rules', 'liability' and 'defence union' were chosen between six and eight times. Certain terms were selected only once and those included, 'compensation', 'confusing', 'fog', 'unclear', 'success' and 'perfectionism'.

Results showed a clear link between dental law and expected professional standard. Interestingly, words that linked to a negative perception of dentistry including 'compensation', 'liability' and 'scandals' were not selected at all or selected only once.

When asked about their views on 'dental ethics', 'professionalism' was the most chosen word (selected 12 times). This was followed by the words 'beliefs' and 'communication' which were selected equally by the group (eight times). The words 'obligations', 'opinion', 'understanding' and 'ill defined' were also chosen between five and six times each. Terms that were selected only once, included the words: 'optional', 'confusion' and 'religious impact'.

The questions were answered in a straightforward manner with no hesitation or demands for clarification.

There was a need to repeat the research cycle to test if there were any changes to students' perception of the subject at the end of the course. The same questionnaire was repeated with the same format. However, an additional comments' section was added allowing students to comment on how they view the subject with the chance to use their own words. This second cycle of the research was conducted at the last contact day of the course, some six months after the first questionnaire took place.

All 16 students answered the second questionnaire. Results showed that for dental law, the words 'GDC standard' and 'regulations' remained at the top of the selected terms chosen by students followed by the terms 'rules' and 'obligations'. The use of words like 'defence union' dropped in half in the second cycle of the research. Words like 'fog', 'unclear', 'fear' and 'confusing' were not selected at all at this stage.

Students' comments about dental law in the second cycle reflected the clarity of the topic of dental law in their mind:

'My views are clearer on the regulations and more aware on the reason and the need for those regulations.'

'I feel that I now know or at least understand better the aspects of dental law.'

'Interesting, stimulating and very helpful in answering dento-legal queries. Dental law defines standards and obligations for the safe treatment of patients.'

For dental ethics, results were similar to the first cycle and students' comments reflected their uncertainty about the subject. For example:

'...ethics is still a bit of a mystery'

'...ethics has been interesting and really got me thinking', it caused more questions with every answer which lead to good discussion...'

'...I was challenged to address concepts in details that I would otherwise avoid or superficially address.'

DISCUSSION

This group of students was self-motivated and their decision to embark on a new postgraduate course was driven by the fact that they were interested in the subject rather than required to do the course by their employers. This was supported by their answers where 14 out of 16 chose to do the course because of their interest in the subject. For this group, it is fair to state that the subject of law and ethics was of interest and relative clarity. In his social learning theory, Rotter^{14,15} discussed intrinsic and extrinsic locus of control. He argued how successful people are usually self-motivated with the drive to succeed inside of them (intrinsic) rather than outside of them (extrinsic), for example the fear of losing a job, being sued or getting financial or academic gain. Although Rotter's work was to study business people in the USA, his theory can be referred to in other fields including dental practice. This group of students studied here was clearly intrinsically motivated and that made them perhaps different in their perception toward the subject of dental law and ethics even before the start of the course. They are not typically representative of all postgraduate dental students in the UK. This presents the case to repeat the cycle of research to include a larger sample and more diverse groups of students. This research sheds some light on this particular group of students who are self-motivated and interested in dental law and ethics. Further research in the wider population of dental practitioners is needed to further explore their perception of the topic.

A clear link was shown between dental law and expected professional standard with words linked to a negative perception of dentistry not been selected at all or selected only once (for example, 'compensation', 'liability' and 'scandals'). This highlights a better than expected image for dentistry and dental practitioners and not the bleak picture of law suits, disciplinary action and compensation culture that is sometimes reflected by the media.¹⁶⁻²⁰ These are expected results and it links in with the literature where students

chosed dentistry as a profession due to its positive image.^{21–23} Complying with the GDC standards and regulations together with continuous professional development^{24,25} are the main focus of dental practitioners and therefore it is not surprising that when it comes to the term ‘dental law’, words like ‘regulations’ and ‘standards’ were on the top of the list of the selected choices. This paper highlights the relevance and the links of the regulations for this group of students in their perception about dental law.

The word ‘professionalism’ was the most chosen word that linked to students’ understanding about dental ethics. Results support the literature views on the link between professionalism and ethics in medicine and dentistry as the two terms go hand in hand.^{26,27}

The fact that the term ‘religious impact’ was chosen only once was interesting as the link between religion and ethics seems obvious.²⁸ Also values and principles are often linked to religious codes for example, the Bible or the Quran, with principles like the Ten Commandments for example, forming the ethical codes.²⁹ However, research showed that it is not a straightforward link between ethics and religion.^{30,31} The term ‘beliefs’ was chosen more than the term ‘religious impact’ reflecting the positive and the more inclusive connotation of the word ‘belief’ in the UK society. This is not to rule out that there is a religious impact but the participants perhaps gave more priority to what seemed to be more relevant to them in the limited choice they had to make.

For both dental law and dental ethics, the perception of this particular group of students was in-line with the overall framework that was set by the regulatory bodies, for example, GDC and their view of both subjects before the start of course was focused on the professional expectations as dental practitioners. Looking at the selected words, the perception of the subject of dental law and ethics before embarking on the course appeared to be clear with some hesitation reflected in certain words selection for example, ‘fog’, ‘unclear’ and ‘confusing’.

After reflecting on the results from this first questionnaire at the start of the course, emphasis on deeper ethical and legal issues were highlighted and made clearer during contact days for example, through online blogs and group discussion. Additionally, ethical principles were not introduced in the framework of the universal Ten Commandments since participants did not seem to be inclined to consider the religious impact as the main basis of the ethical approach which was informed by the results of the first cycle of this research.

For the second cycle of questionnaire, results showed that words selection for dental law was still based around the regulatory body’s guideline and the principles that govern the profession. Elements of any ambiguity that were thinly present at the start of the course disappeared with no selection of any of the negative emotion words. In an answer to the question on ‘how you now view the subject of dental law and ethics after taking part in this PG course’ students’ comments reflected a deeper clarity about the subject especially with regards to dental law.

The observation that ethics remained less clear than dental law could be attributed to the nature of ethics as a discipline where a demarcation of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ is not always clear or standardised³² compared to law for example. This is not to rule out that the content and/or delivery of this part of the course may need further improvement. Another cycle of action research may help in identifying the case. It is understandable that students gain more clarity in their studied subject towards the end of their degree³³ which is shown here with regards to dental law; however, dental ethics remained somehow challenging for students, raising more questions than answers. It is also worth noting that studying a multifaceted subject like ethics requires a great deal of thinking and reflection. This may result in more unclarity in one’s own original thinking. McPhail,³⁴ talked about ‘re-humanising’ the accounting profession through ethics education to make them think about ‘the other’ highlighting the fact that ethics education speaks to individuals at a personal level. This in turn poses a challenge to personal views, beliefs and opinions and will in turn raises the perception of uncertainty. With this in mind, efforts can be focused into explaining that to students in advance as they embark on studying a subject like ethics. This will also have an impact on the order in which the ethics module is delivered with practical engagement and debates on ethical dilemmas not presented at the full front of the module but rather incorporated gradually.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the perception toward studying the subject of dental law and ethics among postgraduate dental students in the UK is in line with the current guideline and regulations governing the dental profession. For this small group of students, perception of dental law was clearer at the end of the course compared to the beginning and any thinly presented uncertainty that was reported before the start of the course, disappeared completely which is in line with the literature and the expectation

of regulatory bodies on dental practitioners. Views towards dental ethics reflected the complexity of the subject and - in students’ words - ‘it caused more questions with every answer’. Results from this work will be used to further develop taster days as a marketing tool for the course, enhancing the information sent to students before they start the course and to assist in the order in which the course content runs. This remains a small scale study and repeating the cycle with a new, larger and more diverse cohort is recommended to establish a clearer picture and to test the impact of changes made so far based on these results. This qualitative research paper provides an important aspect of understanding how those who are interested in the topic, perceived it before and after studying the course. It is relevant to educators and educational supervisors as well as trainers who support those who are interested in dental law and ethics.

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