Ethics and the GMC core curriculum: a survey of resources in UK medical schools

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Abstract

Objectives – To study the resources available and resources needed for ethics teaching to medical students in UK medical schools as required by the new GMC core curriculum.

Design – A structured questionnaire was piloted and then circulated to deans of medical schools.

Setting – All UK medical schools

Results – Eighteen out of 28 schools completed the questionnaire, the remainder either indicating that their arrangements were “under review” (4) or not responding (6). Among those responding: 1) library resources, including video and information technology were found to be fairly well developed; 2) many schools had a good supply of handouts and sample cases for teaching; 3) most had a written syllabus, and 4) two-thirds examined in the subject. However, many schools indicated that there was an urgent need for: 1) full-time teachers (most ethics teaching is still by part-time and voluntary staff); funding for books and journals, and 3) additional teaching materials (including further case vignettes, handouts and sample exam questions).

Conclusions – There has been a considerable overall improvement in resources for medical ethics teaching since the time of the last national survey (The Pond Report).1 However, provision varies widely from medical school to medical school. The particular needs identified were for full-time teachers, library resources and teaching materials. Wider use of existing organisations concerned with medical ethics could help to meet these needs.

Introduction

The General Medical Council's recently published report on education places a new obligation on medical schools to include ethics as part of the core curriculum for the training of medical students.2 At a conference following publication of the report, however, held at the Royal College of Physicians in London, concerns were expressed about the resources available to medical schools for teaching in this area. The survey reported here explored this issue, looking both at the resources currently available to medical schools for ethics teaching and the additional resources they need. The results show that while most medical schools are able to offer ethics teaching in one form or another, there are a number of well-defined areas in which additional resources are urgently required.

Method

A brief (two-page) questionnaire was developed on the basis of the concerns raised at the conference and the Royal College of Physicians and through discussion with members of the Association for Healthcare and Medical Ethics Teachers. The draft questionnaire was piloted with three members of the association and three deans of medical schools. The final version of the questionnaire was then sent to the deans of a list of 28 medical schools in the United Kingdom, supplied by the Royal College of Physicians. A covering letter emphasised the practical focus of the study. A reminder letter was sent to those deans who had not responded after one month. After a further month, those who had still not responded were telephoned.

The questionnaire focused exclusively on the resources for ethics teaching, as distinct from teaching methods, syllabus time or other aspects of the practical arrangements. The first page covered the resources available to respondents, the second the resources they needed, in each of six key areas: 1) personnel, 2) books, journals and other library resources, 3) video and information technology, 4) teaching materials (for example case vignettes), 5) the use of a syllabus, and 6) examination and assessment. There was also a further more general question on funding.

Responses in each of the six main sections of the questionnaire were scored in arbitrary units for resources available, 0=none, 1=minimal, 2=adequate, 3=ample; and for additional resources needed, 0=none, 1=minimal, 2=moderate and 3=considerable. This gave a maximum overall score
of 18 for each of resources available and additional resources needed. Further details of the scoring are given in appendix 1.

**Results**

Twenty-two replies were received from twenty-eight medical schools, a return rate of 79%. Of the six who did not respond, four were from the ten London schools and only two from the eighteen schools in the rest of the country. A further four schools indicated that they were unable to complete the questionnaire because their curricula were under revision. One respondent taught in two medical schools and replied on behalf of both. There were thus seventeen completed questionnaires covering 18 medical schools.

All those responding indicated that they had resources of some kind for medical ethics teaching. However, the extent and nature of these varied widely. The overall scores for each of the responding medical schools (listed in descending order of resources available) is summarised in the figure. This shows the total resources available (shaded bars) and the total additional resources needed (open bars). As can be seen, while all the responding medical schools had resources of some kind for medical ethics teaching, only three could be said to be really well resourced (scoring 17), while two were poorly resourced in all areas (scoring five and four respectively). Moreover, a majority even of those who were reasonably well resourced, indicated that they still needed considerable additional resources (indicated by the unshaded bars). We return to the interpretation of these results below.

The results for each of the six specific areas (ie excluding funding) are summarised in table 1 (resources available) and table 2 (additional resources needed). The need for additional funding (not shown in the tables) was mentioned by most respondents in relation to one or more of these areas, in particular: a) support for teaching, including full and part-time staff and outside “experts” (such as lawyers and philosophers); b) expansion of library resources; c) development of video and information technology materials, especially for self-tuition; d) development of new teaching materials; and e) research into examination and assessment methods.

Turning now to each of the specific areas, the main findings for resources available and resources needed were:

1) **PERSONNEL**

Two-thirds of the responding medical schools used
either part-time teachers or lecturers from outside the medical school. Six employed full-time teachers. Seven of the medical schools indicated that their main requirement in this area was for full-time teachers. Four were looking for part-time teachers.

2) BOOKS, JOURNALS AND OTHER LIBRARY RESOURCES
Half of the schools had more than one hundred books on medical ethics available to students (mostly through departmental or school libraries); most took at least one medical ethics journal and five took five or more. Three schools had databases and many had collections of newspaper clippings, bibliographies and newsletters.

Thirteen of the eighteen schools said that their library resources needed to be updated. The main specific need identified in this area was for books. Eleven schools wanted more books and two suggested that an inter-school loan scheme should be set up. Only two schools wished to take additional medical ethics journals but a further two said they needed additional funding to expand their library resources. Two wanted access to collections of press cuttings.

3) VIDEO/INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Thirteen schools had a collection of videotapes for seminar teaching, either the Nuffield set (a collection produced at the London Hospital by Professor Len Doyal with sponsorship from The Nuffield Foundation) or a set of similar size. Most indicated that they already had access to library search facilities, such as Medline and Bioethicsline.

A number of schools noted that their information technology arrangements were under review and that they would welcome information on resources available.

4) TEACHING MATERIALS/CASE VIGNETTES
Fourteen schools had well-developed handouts on medical ethics and law in addition to reading lists. They also had collections of long and short teaching cases, many with tutor’s notes.

Despite being well-resourced in this area, there was a strong demand from twelve schools for additional teaching materials including case vignettes, reading lists and other handouts. One of the schools suggested setting up a national database and exchange scheme.

5) SYLLABUS
Fourteen schools had a specific syllabus, either very broad in outline or detailed. Eight schools indicated that the syllabus (or expanded syllabus) would be useful. Three said it would be useful to have examples of syllabuses and a further two were planning to write their own.

6) EXAMINATION AND ASSESSMENT
Eleven of the responding schools included medical ethics in their examinations. Of these, eight used a written form of assessment, either a long essay (four) or “unseen” examination (four). Three used OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations) and one, continuing assessment. Six schools noted the need for sample questions and essay topics for use in examinations.

Discussion
At the time of the Pond Report,1 teaching in medical ethics was offered by only a handful of medical schools. A recent review by one of the authors of this report showed that the position has improved to some extent since then, most medical schools now offering teaching in medical ethics, either as a general course or in specific subject areas such as HIV4 and breaking bad news.5 The present study, focusing specifically on the question of resources, broadly confirms this positive picture: a majority of medical schools reported that they have a good supply of books, journals, video teaching tapes and case vignettes, many have, or are developing, a written syllabus; and many include ethical aspects of practice in their examination and assessment procedures.
Although this is encouraging many schools responding to the questionnaire also reported a lack of resources in one or more key areas. It is possible, in addition, that many if not all of those whose only response was that their arrangements were “under review” (four schools), or who failed to respond at all (a further six schools), are under-resourced for medical ethics teaching. There are many reasons for failing to respond to questionnaires and it may be that these schools are in fact well resourced for ethics teaching. But given the practical focus of the questionnaire, its brief format, and our repeated follow-up, it seems more likely that they failed to respond because they felt that they had, at present, relatively little to offer. If this is right, then, it could be that as many as 50% of UK medical schools remain inadequately resourced for teaching medical ethics. Moreover, even those who reported that they were relatively well resourced, identified a number of outstanding needs, in particular for additional teaching materials (case vignettes, reading lists, and so forth), access to relevant information technology, sample examination questions, expanded library resources, and full-time teachers.

The overall picture is thus of an improving situation but with some medical schools still seriously under-resourced and a majority requiring additional resources in one or more key areas.

Providing additional resources is partly, and unavoidably, a matter of additional funding. The use of team teaching, piggy-backed on everyday clinical training, can offer a cost-effective and clinically appropriate way of introducing ethical aspects of practice into clinical training. However, medical ethics, like any other academic subject, can only be effectively taught with the active involvement of one or more members of staff carrying direct responsibility for the subject and being actively engaged in research. This is reflected in the survey in the need, expressed by no less than seven schools, for full-time teachers.

Materials for medical ethics teaching are now becoming available both in the UK and the USA where the Kennedy Institute of Ethics keeps a collection of course materials from many US medical schools. There are also a number of organisations in the United Kingdom able to offer academic and practical support for the development of ethics teaching, through exchange of information and experience, access to potential teachers, advice on ethics courses and training programmes for course organisers. Besides local university departments, relevant organisations include the Association for Healthcare and Medical Ethics Teachers, the Royal College of Psychiatrists Philosophy Group, and the UK Forum for Teachers of Medical Ethics and Law (see also appendix 2). Wider use of these organisations could help to ensure that this key element in the General Medical Council’s core curriculum is speedily and fully implemented in all British medical schools.

Conclusions

The results of this questionnaire survey indicate that most medical schools are now able to offer teaching in medical ethics, consistent with the requirements of the General Medical Council’s new core curriculum. Many schools remain under-resourced in this area, however. The main needs identified were for 1) teaching materials, 2) funding for additional library resources, and 3) additional full-time teaching posts. A number of existing academic and professional organisations could contribute to the further development of teaching in this area.

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References


Appendix 1

DETAILS OF SCORING FOR SPECIFIC AREAS

Section 1 – Personnel

Resources available: 0=none; 1=no dedicated personnel (for example, teaching incidental to general clinical training or use of outside lecturers); 2=part-time only; 3=at least one full-time. Additional resources needed: 0=none; 1=outside lecturers only; 2=part-time; 3=full-time.
Section 2 – Books, journals and other library resources
Resources available: 0 = none; 1 = less than 10 books; 2 = 10 - 100; 3 = more than 100. (The number of books was a good indication of overall library resources available). Additional resources needed: 0 = none; 1 = minimal; 2 = up-dating of facilities; 3 = substantial specific needs listed. (Additional library resources needed were generally indicated qualitatively.)

Section 3 – Video/information technology
Resources available: 0 = none; 1 = less than the Nuffield set; 2 = the Nuffield set or equivalent; 3 = more than the Nuffield set. (Most schools had access to medline and/or other search facilities). Additional resources needed: 0 = none; 1 = minimal; 2 = some extra videos needed; 3 = major gaps in resources.

Section 4 – Teaching materials/case vignettes
Resources available: 0 = none; 1 = minimal; 2 = intermediate; 3 = plentiful. Additional resources needed: 0 = none; 1 = minimal; 2 = general up-dating; 3 = major gaps in resources. (Responses in this section were mostly qualitative. There was a good correlation between handouts, reading lists and case vignettes.)

Section 5 – Syllabus
Resources available: 0 = none; 1 = time-tabled only; 2 = outline syllabus; 3 = detailed written syllabus. Additional resources needed: 0 = none; 1 = uncertain whether useful; 2 = possibly useful; 3 = in preparation or indicated that definitely needed.

Section 6 – Examination and assessment
Resources available: 0 = none; 1 = implicit in clinical assessment; 2 = explicit but no details given; 3 = detailed explicit provision (for example, OSCE and/or written). Additional resources needed: 0 = none; 1 = no resources or said to be not appropriate; 2 = needed but no details given; 3 = detailed specific needs indicated.

Appendix 2
Editor’s Note: The material in this appendix has been collated by the authors of this paper and the JME. Some of it may be out of date and we apologise for any errors or omissions. The JME plans to publish an updated list in a few months’ time. If you have any information which you would like included in this list please would you send it either to the authors of this paper or direct to the Editor, JME.

National centres and societies
The Association of Healthcare and Medical Ethics Teachers, The Medical School, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT.
News and notes

Professor in Palliative Care and Policy

Irene Higginson has recently joined St Christopher’s Hospice as the first ever Professor of Palliative Care and Policy. The post is part of a joint development with King’s College London, and Professor Higginson will be heading up the newly established department which will continue to build on St Christopher’s national and international reputation of combining research, education and teaching with high quality medical and nursing care.

The new department will develop high quality research-based teaching at a postgraduate level, will evaluate policy and will seek to make palliative care more relevant to people from minority ethnic groups and patients with non-malignant conditions. The work will stress the multidisciplinary nature of palliative care and will have a strong clinical input and relevance. It is aimed at improving the care of patients and their families.