

Knowledge about Medicolegal Problems Amongst the Interns and Residents from a Rural Tertiary Care Teaching Hospital in Western Maharashtra - A cross sectional study

Giri Purushottam A*
Chavan Kalidas D**
Phalke Deepak B***

ABSTRACT

Background: "Medico legal" is the term that incorporates the basics of two professions i.e. medicine and law. "Medical Jurisprudence" is the application of knowledge of law in practice of medicine in other words; it deals with legal aspects of medicine such as legal rights, privileges, duties, and obligations of a medical practitioner". The term medico legal has gained a lot of importance in the past years after the passage of the Consumer Protection Act in 1986. Although forensic medicine and medical jurisprudence is the part of curriculum during the second year of medical school in India, still many interns and residents lack the knowledge about medico legal issues. **Aims:** The aim of the present study was to assess the knowledge regarding medico legal problems amongst interns and residents at a rural tertiary care teaching hospital in western Maharashtra. **Material & Methods:** This was a cross-sectional study conducted at Rural Medical College and Pravara Rural Hospital, Loni Dist. Ahmednagar (Maharashtra) consists of total 160 doctors who included 80 interns and the same number of residents over a period of six months from July 2009 to December 2009. A predesigned and pretested questionnaire was used for the data collection. **Results:** In the present study, MLC (medico legal case) is a common abbreviation used by the residents and interns while working in the casualty and the wards, most of them (90%) knew what it stood for. More than 50% (n=52) residents were unaware of the cases to be informed to the police while among interns only 19% (n=15) were correct. 68 (78.75%) interns and 73 (91.25%) residents knew that post-mortem didn't mean that it had to be a police case. **Conclusion:** Overall knowledge of medico legal issues among our residents and interns had not shown upto the mark. There is a need to train these young doctors about various medico legal aspects, their role and responsibilities. The prevalence of certain misconceptions and void in the knowledge about medico legal issues can be done away by giving repeated trainings to them.

Key words: Medico legal, Knowledge, Interns, Residents

INTRODUCTION

India has developed a vast network of both rural as well as urban health care facilities following its independence from the colonial rule.

Author's Affiliation: *Assistant Professor, ***Professor and Head, Department of Community Medicine PSM, Rural Medical College and Pravara Rural Hospital, Loni, Maharashtra, **Professor and Head, Department of Forensic Medicine & Toxicology FMT, Rural Medical College and Pravara Rural Hospital, Loni, Maharashtra, India.

Reprint's Request: Dr. Purushottam A. Giri, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine (PSM), Rural Medical College and Pravara Rural Hospital, Loni, Dist. Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India.

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It has shown a promising rise in both medical professionals and educational institutions. The literacy rate of India is fast catching up with that of the western world. This has brought a striking rise in the level of awareness about health and health care facilities among common people. Each patient is more responsible, aware and informed about his problem. The risks, benefits, alternatives to therapy and side effects are all known. One of the consequences of this change has been the use of judiciary to seek justice against the alleged malpractices of doctors/hospitals by the aggrieved patient or the relatives. The Mudaliar committee

in 1962 has recommended creation of a separate cadre of trained medical jurists in each state to look after such cases. The Madhya Pradesh govt. has established India's first Medico Legal Institute in Bhopal, taking cognizance of the Central Medico Legal Advisory Committee, set up by Union Ministry of Health in 1958.

The Government of India passed an act called Consumer Protection Act in 1986 (CPA)¹ with an aim to protect the interest of consumers. However dilemma persisted about the inclusion of medical services until the Supreme Court of India decided (in *Indian Medical Association v VP Shantha*)² in 1995 to bring it within the ambit of a "Service" as defined in CPA. Beside, medical profession is governed by code of medical ethics and etiquette as laid down by Medical Council of India³. The Supreme Court decision was followed by a sharp rise in number of litigations against doctors and hospitals.

"Medico legal" is the term that incorporates the basics of two professions i.e. medicine and law. "Medical Jurisprudence" is the application of knowledge of law in practice of medicine in other words; it deals with legal aspects of medicine such as legal rights, privileges, duties, and obligations of a medical practitioner". It includes questions of legal and ethical duties of physicians and medico legal assessment of patients for the smooth functioning of society. This field has gained a lot of importance in the past years after the passage of the Consumer Protection Act in 1986. Although forensic medicine and medical jurisprudence is the part of curriculum during the second year of medical school in India, still many interns and residents lack the knowledge about medico legal issues. In these days and age an ignorant doctor can easily make a grave mistake if he is unaware of his rights and responsibilities. The aim of the presented study was to assess the knowledge regarding medico legal problems amongst interns and residents from a rural tertiary care teaching hospital in western Maharashtra.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted during the period of July - December 2009 at Rural Medical College (RMC) and Pravara Rural Hospital (PRH), Loni, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India. Rural Medical College is a recognized institution for imparting medical education, both at under graduate and post graduate level. Pravara Rural Hospital is a tertiary level health care centre attached as a teaching hospital of RMC, Loni. The study population consisted of total 160 doctors who included 80 interns and the same number of residents. The medical professionals surveyed belonged to various departments of the Pravara Rural Hospital and medical college. A pre-designed, pre-tested self administered questionnaire in English was devised to collect data. The tool used had two parts; 1) to obtain demographic data i.e. age, sex, marital status, academic qualification, work experience etc. and 2) Legal terms, basic rights, fundamental duties, admission/transfer/discharge/ death, legal control, medico-legal cases. Data was analyzed in the form of percentages and proportions and Z- test was applied. Z values more than 1.96 were considered as statistically significant.

RESULTS

It was observed from Table-1 that out of total 160 participants, 110 were males (68.75%) and 50 were females (31.25%). There were 53, 70 and 37 participants in the age groups 22-25, 25-28 and >28 years respectively. Male to female ratio was 2.2:1 which shows male predominance. The percentage of first year residents participating in the study was very low. This was perhaps due to extra work load and non availability of time to get involved in the study.

It is evident from Table-2 that the MLC (medico legal case) is a common abbreviation used by the residents and interns while working in the casualty and the wards, most of them (90%) knew what it stood for. More than 50% (n=52) residents

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population

Particulars	Numbers	Percentage
Gender		
Male	110	68.75
Female	050	31.25
Marital Status		
Married	022	13.75
Unmarried	138	86.25
Age (in years), Mean (SD)		
Male	26.74 (1.70)	
Female	26.01 (1.45)	
Length of Service		
0 - ½ years	32	20.00
½ - 1 years	64	40.00
1 - 1 ½ years	12	06.87
1 ½ - 2 years	22	13.75
2 ½ - 3 years	30	19.37

were unaware of the cases to be informed to the police while among interns only 19% (n=15) were correct. 71.25% respondents knew that in which cases post-mortem can be done without informing the relatives. 68 interns (78.75%) and 73 residents (91.25%) knew that post-mortem didn't mean that it had to be a police case. In the present study, 13.5% respondents didn't know what to do with the dead body in case their hospital bills are due. 83.75% of the young doctors knew that all natural deaths within 24 hours should be sent for autopsy. 42.5% interns and 31.5% residents had no idea that there had to be two copies of death certificate in dying declaration. 86.5% of the interviewed were aware that in case of death of an unknown admitted patient, police has to be informed. More than half (61%) interns and (28%) residents were unaware of their responsibility of issuing an injury certificate. 61.8% respondents think that they can't do postmortem after they have given cause of death. In this world of mobile phones 71.0% interns and 26% residents consider telephonic orders to be legal. But beware doctors 'written orders are the real orders'.

DISCUSSION

There is a severe dearth of studies assessing the knowledge, attitude and practices about medico legal issues from the various sections of medical professionals. This study made an honest attempt to fulfill this void. Overall knowledge of medico legal issues among our residents and interns had not shown upto the mark. Our findings were in agreement with those of Mohite PM, et al⁴ who performed a similar study in 2000 showing high level of ignorance about medico legal issues. This lack of knowledge is not restricted to professionals from India only. Even developed nations like USA have issues related to lack of knowledge about medico legal aspect of medicine. Darvall L, et al⁵ concluded that there was a significant disjunction between legal standards and doctors' awareness of those standards, thereby creating a significant source of liability for doctors. Moreno-Hunt, et al⁶ also observed significant lacunae in the knowledge of medico legal issues among obstetrics and gynecology residents in USA. Over 92% respondents were unaware of the laws related to their work as found by ER Walrond, et al⁷.

Similarly Gebremariam and Hagos⁸ concluded that health workers lacked the knowledge on the legal basis of their relationship with their clients. The changing face of the doctor-patient relationship and rapid commercialization of health services has posed new challenges⁹. There are a large number of misconceptions about

various medico legal issues among interns as well as residents.

CONCLUSION

Legal aspects of medicine have always formed an important component of medical education.

Table 2: Assessment of Knowledge about medicolegal problems in the study population

Questions on Knowledge	Interns (n = 80)			Residents (n = 80)			Z - value
	Response (%)	Correct responses (%)	Incorrect responses (%)	Response (%)	Correct responses (%)	Incorrect responses (%)	
1. Which deaths will you inform to police?	80 (100%)	15 (19%)	65 (81%)	80 (100%)	28 (35%)	52 (65%)	6.11
2. Is an intern authorized to do post mortem?	80 (100%)	80 (100%)	00 (0%)	80 (100%)	74 (92%)	06 (8%)	3.03
3. According to law who can perform a post-mortem?	80 (100%)	64 (80%)	16 (20%)	80 (100%)	53 (66%)	23 (34%)	6.93
4. Should cases of attempted suicide be informed to police by private practitioner?	76 (95%)	19 (25%)	57 (75%)	75 (94%)	15 (20%)	60 (80%)	6.78
5. Is it necessary to inform all cases of tubectomy deaths to the police?	40 (50%)	15 (37%)	25 (63%)	69 (86%)	38 (55%)	31 (45%)	9.70
6. Do the staffs working in Govt. hospitals come under the ambit of "CPA"?	44 (55%)	25 (57%)	19 (43%)	73 (91%)	63 (86%)	10 (14%)	10.14
7. Can the police or the court compel a doctor to examine victims of rape in absence of valid consent?	52 (65%)	24 (46%)	28 (54%)	80 (100%)	41 (51%)	39 (49%)	8.88
8. Can the resident legally issue injury certificate in admitted cases?	67 (84%)	26 (39%)	41 (61%)	73 (91%)	53 (72%)	20 (28%)	7.94
9. In case of death due to drug reactions will you inform the police	63 (79%)	29 (46%)	34 (54%)	69 (86%)	46 (67%)	23 (33%)	8.45
10. Patient dies of air embolism caused by intern, who will be responsible?	80 (100%)	29 (36%)	51 (64%)	80 (100%)	44 (55%)	36 (45%)	7.72
11. Is it legally acceptable to write down orders given telephonically by seniors?	65 (81%)	19 (29%)	46 (71%)	61 (76%)	45 (74%)	16 (26%)	7.95
12. Whether consent from relatives is necessary in post-mortem of MLC?	80 (100%)	58 (72%)	22 (28%)	80 (100%)	56 (70%)	24 (30%)	7.17

Thus, from an early stage the future doctors and medical practitioners are made familiar with the legal issues attached to medical practice. The application of the Consumer Protection Act to the medical professionals has only served to bring into focus some of the legal liabilities of the doctors. There is a need to train these young doctors about various medico legal aspects, their role and responsibilities. The prevalence of certain misconceptions and void in the knowledge about medico legal issues can be done away by giving repeated trainings to them. The training programmed must be able to communicate the message in simple and lucid manner and devised in spirit of the local environment and culture. CMEs, workshops or lectures can be used efficiently to convey the broader message to the target professionals.

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