There are a number of obstacles to educating students on ethics during their 4 years of medical and dental school. Some aspects of ethical behavior are affected by attributes that are part of the student's character, which may be difficult to change through education (2). Additionally, a 2007 study discusses the difficulties of adding ethical training to an extremely demanding medical school curriculum (3). Another complication with delaying ethical education until medical school is that medical students who start professional training without well-developed moral motivation and moral sensitivity may not progress in moral reasoning because of the harsh environment, high pressure, and emotional encounters of professional medical training (4). While this complication might highlight the importance of earlier training in ethics, a recent study suggests that medical humanities education cannot be left solely to the undergraduate educational institutions (5). Undergraduate universities must not, however, shirk the responsibility of providing a firm foundation of humanities and ethics education for pre-healthcare professionals. Should more attention be given to addressing students' ethical education during their undergraduate years of preparation for professional healthcare programs? If so, what is the best way to prepare pre-professional, undergraduate students for the ethical challenges they will face in their professional healthcare training and practice?

Abstract

There are many barriers to ethics education of students attending medical and dental schools. The question is asked, "Should more attention be given to addressing students' ethics education during their undergraduate years of preparation for professional healthcare programs?" This qualitative study utilizes digitally recorded personal interviews with two undergraduate pre-healthcare students, one medical student, one recently matriculated dental student, one undergraduate pre-healthcare faculty member, three dental school faculty members, and three medical school faculty members. Interview participants discuss areas of personal knowledge and experience concerning: the admissions process and screening of potential medical/dental students for ethical traits and behaviors, influences on student ethical development, undergraduate pre-healthcare ethics training, and preferred college major for pre-healthcare students.

The study concludes that undergraduate pre-healthcare programs should take the initiative to be proactive and deliberate in strengthening the positive influences on students. Strategies include: 1) humanities curricula to broaden perspectives and increase non-prejudice; 2) mentoring and modeling by older students, faculty, and community and professional volunteers; 3) ethical case study discussions in class or extracurricular activities; and 4) volunteer/service learning activities. Additionally, curriculum learning is enhanced by the use of reflection and writing, discussions, and media.

Key Words: ethics, education, professionalism, moral, mentoring, modeling