Medical Ethics for Medical Undergraduates

It is expected that doctors are professionally sound with all required competencies. It is also expected that while they are practicing medicines and are dealing with patients, attendants, relatives of patients, they practice ethical behaviour with relevant competencies. With the changes in complexities in medical practice the doctors are now encountering increased number of litigations against them most of which are related to ethical issues.

Hence there was a need to train doctors on ethics with a comprehensive teaching module on ethics. The modules of ‘Medical Ethics for Medical Undergraduates’ is to help medical students to recognize the importance of being sensitive to ethical issues within everyday clinical practice and develop in them the ability to effectively address ethical concerns of patients as well as in clinical research involving patients and human beings. The module will also help the students to develop skills and attitudes necessary to guide their conduct on the ethical perspective through the teaching/learning exercises in the medical schools in their undergraduate course.

It is also expected that this module will help a future doctor to (i) practice according to statutory requirements and codes of conduct for medical practice, (ii) demonstrate sensitivity to ethical issues and ethical behaviour in professional practice (iii) identify and apply ethical principles in conducting research; and (iv) to analyze ethical issues and make ethical decisions in medical practice.
Module for Teaching Medical Ethics to Undergraduates
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Introduction

Note – This document is intended as a generic module in medical ethics to identify the key components for an undergraduate curriculum. It is recommended that country-specific changes be made where appropriate.

Importance of medical ethics for medical students

Health care decisions are based not only on clinical and technical grounds, but also on ethical grounds. Although we carefully weigh the clinical and technical aspects, ethical issues involved may be overlooked. A legal framework or code of conduct governing doctor’s decisions and behaviour may help overcome this problem but they often provide rigid guidelines for a limited number of situations.

The general aim of the module is to help medical students to recognize the importance of being sensitive to ethical issues within everyday clinical practice and develop in them the ability to effectively address the ethical concerns of patients, as well as participants in research. The importance of knowing medical ethics is very relevant to a medical professional due to a variety of reasons, including increasing litigation, changes in complexities in medical practice and the importance of consumer courts.

Medical ethics has developed over centuries. In the allopathic system of medicine, such developments commenced from the time of Hippocrates (the Hippocratic oath) and over time has several “codes” have been developed (These include the Helsinki Declaration, World Medical Code and Belmont Report.)
The teaching/learning exercises in this module aim to instil in the student knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to guide their conduct and decision-making as practising doctors.

Development of teaching-learning material based on country-specific situations is considered very necessary to make teaching of ethics more relevant in a given context.

How to use the module

Students are encouraged to actively participate in all the teaching/learning activities of this module. A range of teaching/learning activities including lectures, small group discussions, role play, ward-based assignments and student seminars are used to achieve the module learning outcomes. The learning outcomes for each activity should be used as a guide to assess the adequacy of achievement of the stated competencies.

Students should reflect on their clinical experiences during learning exercises of this module and become competent in applying ethical principles to practices they engage in or observe in the ward setting. They should explore both clinical and non-clinical resources to enrich their learning experiences in the module.

Development of guidelines for the use of teachers, facilitators and students is necessary to assist in the implementation of the module.
Module learning outcomes

On completion of this module a student should be able to:

- Demonstrate awareness of the main professional obligations of doctors
- Practice according to statutory requirements and codes of conduct for medical practice
- Critically analyse ethical issues commonly encountered in medical practice and formulate a framework within which such issues could be resolved
- Demonstrate the ability to resolve ethical issues faced during common clinical scenarios
- Identify the ethical aspects involved in conducting research and apply ethical principles in conducting research
- Demonstrate sensitivity to ethical issues and ethical behaviour within and outside professional practice
Content areas

Core topics

Introduction
Principles of medical ethics

Ethics in clinical practice

- Doctor-patient relationship
  - Patient autonomy
  - Confidentiality
  - Truth telling/disclosure
  - Informed consent
  - End-of-life decisions
  - Patient rights
- Equity and social justice
- Codes of conduct and etiquette
- Professionalism
- Medical negligence
- Professional misconduct
- Ethical dilemmas facing medical students
• Relationship with the pharmaceutical industry
• Issues related to the privatization of health care
• Ethical issues related to reproductive health
• Ethical aspects of treating patients with HIV/AIDS

Specific Ethical issues
• Ethical aspects of genetics
• Ethics of transplantation/organ donation
• Ethical aspects of treating the mentally ill
• Ethical issues in treating children
• Resource allocation in the health-care system
• Ethics of public health and health promotion
• Ethical issues of dealing with other systems of medicine
• Any other country-specific situations

Research ethics
• Principles of research ethics and research publication

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1 e.g. medical tourism, conflict situations, female foeticide, female genital mutilation.
Organization and management of the programme

It is important to identify the stage at which it would be most appropriate to incorporate this module in the medical curriculum. This module may be conducted as a whole during the period identified or split into several components, providing theoretical input initially and the application and practical components of the module at later periods. It should run from the first year onwards throughout the medical curriculum up-to the clerkship year. This will depend on the organization of the entire medical curriculum. Teaching and learning methods should be customized according to the curriculum in each medical school. It is recommended that each institution develops its own organizational structure for the course. Some of the contents is identified as core topics and the rest as subsidiary topics. The core areas are indicated in page 6 and are identified as essential to be covered in an ethics module.

Integration with the rest of the curriculum and clinical practice is proposed, using

- multidisciplinary academic staff representing both clinical and para-clinical fields, members of relevant professionals/governing bodies (eg. medical council, national medical associations);
- members from other relevant disciplines (eg. law, psychology, sociology, economics, philosophy);
- country-specific examples;
- examples to illustrate concepts from clinical cases and routine practice;
- teaching both in clinical and non-clinical settings;
• testing of relevant ethical issues during student assessments in other settings
• continuous reinforcement of ethical aspects across the curriculum;
• handling of some topics by relevant departments in their courses; and
• teaching communication skills as an integral part of the practice ethics prior to and during the teaching of the medical ethics module.

It is recommended that:

• Ministries of health/medical councils advocate with universities and other relevant bodies to include training in medical ethics in the undergraduate curriculum and during internship training.
• The Dean/Principal should coordinate the ethics teaching through a core team chosen from the faculty, assisted by a coordinator.
• The Dean/Principal will identify resource persons at the planning stage of the module and take responsibility for training of trainers.
• Feedback pertaining to each learning activity and the programme as a whole is to be obtained from stakeholders to continuously improve the programme.
• A trainers/facilitators’ guide should be made available to trainers.
• Handbooks for trainers and students are to be made available in the institutions.
• A minimum of 20 hours of training should be allocated for ‘core topics’.
Learning outcomes of individual content areas

Core topics

Introduction

Principles of medical ethics

- Explain the meaning of the term “ethics”
- Describe the global development of medical ethics
- Describe the core principles of medical ethics and their implications
- Recognize ethical issues relevant to the clinical situation and apply the ethical codes as appropriate
- Discuss the development of indigenous ethical codes in the South-East Asian Region
- Demonstrate sensitivity to cultural diversity in medical care

Ethics in clinical practice

1. Doctor patient relationship (the content is considered under the broad title of doctor-patient relationship with sub-sections given under sections 1.1 to 1.6)
   - Discuss the ethical principles applicable within the doctor patient relationship
- Describe the patient’s expectations with regard to the above mentioned aspects and the doctor’s attitude towards those expectations
- Recognize the doctor-patient relationship based on mutual trust and facilitated by effective communication.

1.1 **Patient autonomy (freedom of choice)**
- Explain the importance of patient autonomy
- Explain current procedures adopted in the ward (clinical) setting in maintaining patient autonomy
- Identify situations in which a doctor may have to take decisions in the best interests of the patient
- Explain the process of ensuring patient autonomy while informing/deciding on a treatment modality.

1.2 **Informed consent**
- Describe the different types of consent and the situations in which obtaining consent is required
- Recognize the importance of obtaining valid consent from a patient for investigations and treatment
- Explain how to proceed if a patient refuses treatment
- Explain how to proceed if a patient is incompetent to give consent
- Consider when it is justifiable to refrain from obtaining patient consent

1.3 **Confidentiality**
- Recognize the importance of confidentiality in the doctor patient relationship
- Identify potential weaknesses in the health care and information system
- List the potential situations where it is justifiable to breach confidentiality (e.g. legal requirements).
- Evaluate critically the practice of the principle of confidentiality in the ward setting
1.4 Truth telling/disclosure

- Recognize the importance of telling the patient the truth about his/her medical condition
- Consider when it is justifiable to withhold information from a patient/relative
- Making decisions about giving relevant information to a patient or family by a medical student/doctor
- Analyse the doctor’s role when there is disagreement between the doctor’s view and the views of patient, guardians or relatives

1.5 End-of-life decisions

- Explain what is meant by “a good death” and the principles involved in providing “a good death” to a terminally ill patient
- Explain the terms best interest, advance directives, withdrawal or withholding of life support systems, do not Resuscitate (DNR) orders and euthanasia
- Explain the legal situation with regards to euthanasia
- Respond appropriately to a patient who requests euthanasia
- Apply the ethical principles underlying management options (i.e. ventilation and other options) in the terminally ill
- Apply these principles in improving the quality of life in terminally ill patients
- Demonstrate how you would communicate end-of-life decisions to appropriate persons

1.6 Patient rights

- Describe the concept of rights of individuals including provider rights
- Identify the relationship between rights, duties and responsibilities
- Outline the International Declaration of Human Rights
- Describe the Declaration of Rights of the Patient developed by World Medical Association (WMA)
2. **Equity and social justice**
   - Demonstrate an attitude of equality in dealing with patients irrespective of caste, religion, ethnicity, political affiliations etc.
   - Ethical issues related to resource allocation

3. **Codes of conduct and etiquette**
   - Explain professional code of conduct and etiquette for medical doctors
   - Demonstrate awareness of situations in which doctors have a right to treat or not to treat a patient
   - Discuss the ethical importance of good communication within the medical profession and amongst other professions
   - Describe the international and local codes of conduct for medical practitioners
   - Illustrate with examples, the statutory requirements for medical practitioners

4. **Professionalism**
   - Explain the terms “medical profession” and “professionalism”
   - Describe the key attributes of a medical professional
   - Discuss the relationship of a professional with his/her colleagues and the public
   - Describe how professionalism benefits the medical practitioner and the patient

5. **Medical negligence**
   - Define the term “medical negligence”
   - Describe the criteria for defining wilful negligence
   - Discuss the factors that could lead to negligence and ways of avoiding them
6. **Professional infamous conduct/misconduct**
   - List of professional misconduct
   - List the disciplinary procedures invited by professional misconduct
   - Recognize the necessity for self-regulation in maintaining the standard of practice

7. **Ethical dilemmas facing medical students**
   - Discuss the roles and responsibilities of medical students towards patients
   - Describe the potential sources of ethical dilemmas that medical students face in their clinical training and how to handle them.
   - Recognize the potential sources of unethical conduct during training (including community-based training situations) and in examinations, such as plagiarism, copying, cheating, etc.

8. **Relationship with the pharmaceutical industry and other providers of medical technology facilities (eg. diagnostic set-ups)**
   - Recognize why doctors need to be careful when interacting with the pharmaceutical industry
   - Discuss the ethical and legal criteria in promotion and advertising of medicinal drugs and devices
   - Discuss the doctor’s role and responsibility in dealing with inappropriate promotion practices and requests by the pharmaceutical industry

9. **Issues related to health-care provision by private sector**
   - Discuss issues of access to private health care including insurance
   - Discuss the ethical issues arising from doctors working in both the public and private sectors
10. Ethical issues related to reproductive health

- Describe the ethical issues of termination of pregnancy: the debate about the legal status of the embryo; the terms “pro-life” and “pro-choice” and the arguments put forward by these two camps
- Discuss situations in which termination of pregnancy is permitted in your country
- Discuss ethical and legal issues relevant to permanent methods of contraception
- Discuss ethical disputes in assisted reproductive technologies

11. Ethical aspects of treating patients with HIV/AIDS

- Address the issue of unethical practices such as refusal to treat, stigmatization and unfair resource allocation which may occur in treating patients with HIV/AIDS
- Describe ethical aspects of notification and partner-tracing
- Describe the correct practice of HIV/AIDS testing in patient care and in screening

Specific ethical issues

These topics should be dealt with by the relevant academic departments.

Ethical aspects of genetics

- Discuss how genetic testing and counselling services could be provided in an ethical manner

Ethics of organ transplantation and organ donation

- Discuss the ethical issues related to organ transplantation
- For further reading legal issues relating to all types of organ donation and ethical issue of all types of organ donation
Ethical aspects of treating the mentally ill

- Discuss the ethical and legal concerns of patients with mental illness and substance abuse

Ethical issues related to child health

- Discuss the important ethical issues related to health care and research involving children such as proxy decision-making and promoting the rights of the child

Ethics in public health and health promotion

- Explain the ethical issues that arise in the practice of public health, health promotion and population medicine
- Illustrate examples of ethical issues that arise in providing public health services to groups at special risk

Ethical issues of dealing with other systems of medicine

- Demonstrate the ability to deal effectively with conflicts arising from patient’s usage of other systems of medicine

Research ethics

- Principles of research ethics and research publication
- Introduce the Helsinki Declaration and describe the principles thereof
- Discuss common ethical issues arising from clinical research and research publication
Teaching/learning methods

Teaching guidelines

- as a conceptual tool in adhering to medical ethics
- to sensitize medical students and practitioners to ethical issues
- to strengthen student’s capacity to address ethical issues in practice

Teacher as a role model

Attitudes, values and behaviours can be largely learnt through observation and imitation. This is especially true of ethical practices in the clinical setting. Therefore, it is imperative that all academics, especially clinician teachers, act as positive role models in improving the teaching and learning of ethics.

Teaching methods

- Lectures
- Small group discussions (SGDs)
- Role play
- Student-centered seminars/project presentations
- Demonstrations
- Tutorials
- Integrated ward classes/ward-based teaching
- Debates
**Formative assessment activities**

Students are exposed to formative assessment, self-evaluation activities and peer assessment activities. These activities are conducted with the aim of providing feedback in assignment writing and answering questions.

For this purpose, methods available for measuring attitudes could be used.

Conducting formative assessments would be part of the duties of the core group and the coordinator, who has to ensure that the students are assessed during the course.

**Development of country-specific/situation-specific learning material is necessary.** Considerations have to be given to develop materials that could be shared between countries of the region.

Some examples of teaching material are provided in the annexes.
Student assessments

Assessment guidelines

- Use an array of assessment methods
- Authentic and contextual scenarios (based on real life clinical situations) should ideally be used
- Use of continuous assessments with incorporation of formative assessments and summary assessments is recommended
- Assess achievement of competencies and module learning outcomes

Timing of the assessment: Competencies should be assessed prior to being permitted to be practitioners.

It is recommended that the assessment be incorporated as a part of the assessments in the relevant subjects in both theory and practice.

Suggested methods

Case-based MCQs

Short essay questions: clinical scenarios with ethical issues can be utilized to assess students’ capacity to apply ethical principles in practice. Alternatively, students may be asked to write short notes on various topics.
Clinical testing

This can be done at Objectively Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE)/ Practically Assessed Clinical Examination Skills (PACES) and structured viva setting where stations with ethical issues can be presented and students are expected to handle the ethical issues competently within a given time period. Communication skills could be assessed simultaneously.

**Integrated assessment:** This is achieved by testing ethical principles and practice at other exams, mainly as parts of module assessment questions, the theory component of clinical subjects and during clinical case assessments. This is helpful in achieving integration between disciplines and demonstrating applicability of ethical principles.

**Assignments/reflective logs:** students are provided with the topics and guidelines for assignments. Some assignments are based on practical activities carried out in the wards.

Students are also asked to write reflective logs-on conclusion of specific activities assigned to them, highlighting learning that occurred during the activity, successes encountered in carrying out tasks, areas identified for improvement, and plans for improving knowledge, skills and attitudes in identified areas.

While adequate time is given to complete these assignments and write reflective logs, they should be submitted for correction on the specified dates.

**Assessment via audio-visual material:** Audio visual material developed by staff demonstrating ethical practices such as obtaining consent and getting students to critically analyse them or by getting students to role-play these scenarios and recording them to provide feedback.

**Peer observation and team observation:** During practical activities students are given guidance to provide constructive feedback to their peers on their performance, their strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement, especially in the skills domain. This activity also encourages students to reflect on their personal practices, leading to identification of areas to be improved. It is suggested that feedback sessions be well structured through the use of feedback forms and checklists, which also act as a guide for the student in providing constructive feedback.
Resource materials


Annexes

These annexures are the actual material used in teaching/learning activities of the ethics module in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo. The clinical scenarios were developed by the Behavioural Sciences Stream based on Sri Lankan scenarios and some were based on resource materials in Health Ethics in South East Asia (Volume 4) developed by the WHO.
Annex 1

Sample tutor guide for a Small Group Discussion on truth telling

Objectives

At the end of this learning activity, the students should be able to;

- Appreciate the importance in telling the truth to the patient.
- Decide when it is justifiable to withhold information from a patient/relative.
- Make decisions regarding giving information to a patient as a medical student/doctor.

Your task

- Appoint a chairperson and a secretary.
- Students should handle one case vignette at a time. They should be encouraged to have an open discussion about the ethical issues involved in each case regarding truth telling.
- Ask students to discuss answers to questions asked under ‘suggested topics for discussion.’
- Make sure that the discussion is going in the correct direction.
- At the end of each activity ask the secretary to read a summary of the discussion

Facilitating a broad discussion is more important than going for specific answers to any questions.
Please note that the students have had a lecture on Principles of Medical Ethics prior to this small group discussion.

Further reading

- Pathways in medical ethics by A.G. Johnson (p 69-73)
- Doing right: A practical guide for physicians and medical trainees by P.C. Herbert (p64 – 83)

Case 1

The case of a child with encephalitis

Asanka, a 2 year old boy who was previously healthy, suddenly developed fever and loss of consciousness and was admitted to a paediatric ward. In the ward he was diagnosed as having encephalitis. The parents are very worried. They are educated people and want to know whether their child will be able to function normally. You as a medical officer will tell them the truth and inform them that the prognosis is variable and give the range of possibilities. i.e. that the child could recover completely but that the parents should also be prepared to accept that he may not be able to walk again. There could be paralysis along with possible mental retardation.

Suggested topics for discussion

Think about the case and identify the pros and cons of providing full information concerning the prognosis of the child.

- Disclosure of information promotes good outcome and improves patient’s treatment by strengthening the bond between the family and the doctor.
- Disease will obviously affect how the patient will be able to lead his life in the future. The parents may wish to be prepared for the future by having accurate information about the disease and this will help them in their thinking.
- Non-disclosure can harm the patient in many ways. If they are not informed about their medical condition they may fail to obtain medical attention when they should. Providing information reduces the risk of harm to the patient.
Even in this case it is difficult to predict the harmful effects for example, whether this child may not be able to walk any more or possible mental retardation. This may adversely affect the parents’ mental state and they may suffer from severe psychological trauma.

Care must be taken when giving information regarding a serious illness.

There should be an ideal setting for disclosure of information - correct time/correct place/well prepared setting.

Giving bad news hurriedly in a busy clinic with little explanation and no opportunity for the patient to ask questions can result in unnecessary psychological trauma.

How would you respond if you were the medical student allocated to this patient and the parents wanted to discuss the prognosis of the child with you?

- Points for the student to discuss
  - Find out what they want to know.
  - You must tell the parents that you will first speak to the doctors and then come back.
  - You should first speak to the medical team and find out the information already given.
  - You should find the correct information.
  - Ask the team whether it is alright to give the information.
  - Then give information using the SPIKES model of breaking bad news.

How would you handle the situation if you were the senior registrar looking after the patient?

- Here the parents are very worried about the condition of the child. After confirming the definitive diagnosis, breaking bad news should be done in the following way.
  - You must allocate enough time for discussion.
  - Maintain good rapport with the parents.
- Avoid medical jargon and use simple language.
- Give them enough time to ask questions and clarify what is unclear.
- Tell them the actual diagnosis, prognosis, possible consequences and further treatment options.
- Schedule for follow up sessions.
- Psychological support/counselling.

Case 2

The case of the man who is not informed of a diagnosis of stomach cancer

Mr. Pieris, who is 60 yrs. of age, had symptoms of progressive difficulty in swallowing, marked loss of weight and vomiting soon after meals. The symptoms had been present for about 3-4 months. He was admitted to the surgical ward where he stayed for two weeks. After doing an endoscopic biopsy he was diagnosed as having carcinoma of the stomach and an oesophago-gastrectomy is planned. Assume that you are the senior registrar of the ward. You do not want to tell the actual diagnosis to the patient because you know that his prognosis is very poor and that the patient is very depressed, and you think that after telling the truth he may not follow the treatment.

Suggested topics for discussion

What are the ethical issues involved in this case regarding truth telling?

In situations of disclosure of information ethical principles come into play.

- Autonomy – right to determine his or her course of action according to a plan chosen by the person.
- Consent – enabling patient to make informed choices and respecting his/her right to accept or refuse treatment.
- Confidentiality
- Veracity – providing patient with adequate information

However in the above case the ethical principles are not fulfilled.
What are your views regarding the doctor withholding information?

In this case you are the senior registrar of the surgical unit but you didn’t disclose the truth to the patient purposely, because you thought that giving information may cause him psychological trauma, and that he may not follow the treatment regime. But this would be unethical. It is the right of the patient to know the truth regarding his condition. So you must ask the patient whether he wants to know about the condition indicating that it would not be very good news.

What are the situations where withholding information from a patient can be justified?

- When the patient is mentally incapable of understanding the situation. e.g. – very depressed person
- In the case of a child when he/she is unable to understand.
- An emergency when the medical condition is so unstable that disclosure of information is considered unsafe or time consuming.
- Some patients do not wish to know some particular information that most patients would want and need to know. (Patient’s waiver)
- When a doctor decides for a seemingly capable patient that it is in the patient’s best interest not to know certain information, then the doctor is using therapeutic privilege.

Demonstrate how you will obtain informed consent for the surgical procedure from this patient, after you have explained the true clinical situation to the patient and he has come to terms with it. (2 students should role play this situation while others observe and give appropriate feedback on the proceedings)
Annex 2

Sample tutor guide for a small Group Discussion on end of life decisions

Introduction

- There are some situations when a patient has come to the end of his/her life and a decision about withholding treatment has to be made.

- The word Euthanasia originates from two Greek words, the term “Eu” means “Well” and “Thanatos” means “Death” and it literally means an “Easy death”.

- It can also be defined as deliberate administration of a lethal drug to hasten the death in suffering patients. This is also referred to as “Active Euthanasia” since the doctor plays an active role in terminating the patient’s life.

- As in most other countries euthanasia is illegal in Sri Lanka as well.

- Doctors in some countries, who have admitted that they have assisted terminally ill patients to end their lives, have been prosecuted and some have even been sent to prison.

- When a patient has come close to his/her end-of-life, the management changes into providing a ‘good death’ for the patient.

- Prolonging life has to be separated from prolonging death.

Objectives

- After completing this activity, the students should be able to Identify appropriate ways of dealing with situations in which withholding treatment becomes an option

- Explain the meaning of the term Euthanasia
• Identify the ethical principles involved in Euthanasia
• Recognize and be sensitive to the fact that euthanasia is illegal in Sri Lanka as in most other countries
• Identify how to respond appropriately to a patient who requests Euthanasia
• Explain what is meant by ‘good death’
• Identify how to provide a ‘good death’ to a patient
• Identify situations where prolonging life progresses to prolonging death

Your task:
• Appoint a chairperson and a secretary.
• Students should handle one case vignette/activity at a time, with the chairperson facilitating all discussions.
• Ask students to discuss answers to questions asked under ‘suggested topics for discussion.’
• Make sure that the discussions are going in the correct direction.
• At the end of each activity ask the secretary to read a summary of the discussion
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Hence there was a need to train doctors on ethics with a comprehensive teaching module on ethics. The modules of ‘Medical Ethics for Medical Undergraduates’ is to help medical students to recognize the importance of being sensitive to ethical issues within everyday clinical practice and develop in them the ability to effectively address ethical concerns of patients as well as in clinical research involving patients and human beings. The module will also help the students to develop skills and attitudes necessary to guide their conduct on the ethical perspective through the teaching/learning exercises in the medical schools in their undergraduate course.

It is also expected that this module will help a future doctor to (i) practice according to statutory requirements and codes of conduct for medical practice, (ii) demonstrate sensitivity to ethical issues and ethical behaviour in professional practice (iii) identify and apply ethical principles in conducting research; and (iv) to analyze ethical issues and make ethical decisions in medical practice.