

Joint Doctors for Choice UK and BSACP Position Statement: Undergraduate Education on Abortion

Background

The RCOG's 2021 Undergraduate Curriculum specifies that medical students should learn about the legal, ethical and professional aspects of abortion and also the clinical aspects, including treatment and management. [1] And the GMC includes abortion as a condition in its Medical Licensing Assessment guidance, so all medical students may be assessed on the clinical aspects of abortion in their final medical school exams from 2024/25. [2]

Yet research shows that many medical schools focus their teaching on the legal and ethical aspects of abortion, with insufficient time spent on the clinical aspects of abortion care. [3] Four major barriers to comprehensive clinical teaching have been identified: a lack of adequate curriculum time; a lack of clinical learning opportunities; a lack of willing teachers with the relevant expertise and abortion being perceived a sensitive topic. [3]

Many medical students are dissatisfied with this situation, expressing a desire to be able to provide competent and respectful abortion-related care when they qualify. They recognise that because abortion is so common, as newly qualified doctors they will encounter patients who need/have had an abortion across a wide range of specialties and settings including obstetrics and gynaecology, sexual healthcare, emergency medicine and general practice. They believe the sensitivity of the topic and the stigma surrounding it should be drivers for comprehensive clinically focused, inclusive education, rather than barriers to it. [4] This lack of clinical education contributes to the stigmatisation of abortion and marks it out as different to other clinical topics.

Some UK medical schools, such as University College London (UCL), have overcome these barriers and secured sufficient teaching time to provide comprehensive and inclusive teaching on the legal, ethical, political and crucially, clinical aspects of abortion, as well as arranging clinical placements in local NHS and independent abortion services. [5] This teaching is very well evaluated and their educational resources are available for any medical school to use through the DfCUK website. [6] DfC have also been running a curriculum champions project to improve UK medical school abortion teaching using an eight-step plan, which has had some success in around 16 medical schools. [7]

We believe that:

- Every medical, nursing and midwifery student should be exposed to comprehensive and inclusive abortion teaching. Not only would this prepare them to provide competent, compassionate, ethically informed care when they qualify, it would foster conscientious commitment to abortion care, thereby contributing to maintaining the future abortion care

workforce, while normalising and destigmatising abortion, a procedure one in three UK women will have by the age of 45.

- Each medical, nursing and midwifery school should dedicate at least the same amount of curriculum time to the clinical aspects as they do to the legal and ethical aspects of abortion, with a minimum of three hours recommended on clinically focused teaching.
- It is essential that medical, nursing and midwifery schools address the barriers to teaching, to ensure all healthcare students have the knowledge, skills and attitudes to provide competent and respectful abortion-related care when they qualify.

For support in improving abortion education at your institution please contact doctorsforchoiceuk@gmail.com

References

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