

KATARZYNA SOBOLEWSKA, JACEK A. PIĄTKIEWICZ, ANDRZEJ SZPAK,
DOROTA HUZARSKA

Wiedza studentów ostatniego roku studiów niektórych kierunków Uniwersytetu Medycznego w Białymstoku o prawach pacjenta

The knowledge of patient rights among the last year students of certain faculty programs at the Medical University of Białystok

Streszczenie

Wstęp. Znajomość praw pacjenta jest istotnym elementem właściwej realizacji praktyki zawodowej w zawodach medycznych. Studenci uczelni medycznych powinni być w tym zakresie przygotowani do przyszłej pracy.

Cel. Głównym celem pracy było zebranie danych, dotyczących wiedzy studentów ostatnich lat kierunków uczelni medycznej, na temat praw pacjenta.

Materiał i metody. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone wśród 194 studentów ostatnich lat kierunków: lekarskiego, farmacji, pielęgniarstwa oraz zdrowia publicznego Uniwersytetu Medycznego w Białymstoku. Wybrano tych respondentów ze względu na fakt, iż w niedługim czasie rozpoczynają pracę zawodową. Narzędzie badawcze stanowiła ankieta autorska. Składała się ona z 27 pytań – 7 otwartych i 20 zamkniętych (2 – wielokrotnego wyboru i 18 – jednokrotnego wyboru). Konstrukcja ankiety opierała się na trzech zasadniczych częściach. Pierwsza zawierała pytania socjometryczne, druga dotyczyła ogólnej znajomości praw pacjenta, natomiast trzecia uszczegóławiała znajomość jednego z najważniejszych praw pacjenta – prawa do informacji.

Wyniki. Znajomość praw pacjenta wśród studentów jest zdecydowanie niewystarczająca. W podziale na poszczególne kierunki największą wiedzę w tej dziedzinie wykazali studenci pielęgniarstwa, natomiast gorzej wypadli studenci wydziału lekarskiego. Najważniejszym źródłem informacji na temat praw pacjenta są w opinii badanych studia, przy czym ilość przekazywanych w trakcie zajęć informacji jest ich zdaniem niewystarczająca. Zwraca uwagę fakt, że studenci wydziału lekarskiego uzyskują informacje o prawach pacjenta na ostatnich latach studiów, a studenci pielęgniarstwa – już na pierwszym roku studiów.

Badani wykazali braki wiedzy z zakresu podstawowych dokumentów i aktów prawnych regulujących prawa pacjenta, takich jak Karta Praw Pacjenta czy ustawa o zakładach opieki zdrowotnej. Wśród studentów pielęgniarstwa znajomość praw pacjenta deklarowało 97,4% osób, a wśród studentów wydziału lekarskiego – 78,3% osób. Większość ankietowanych (53,6%) wymieniała prawo pacjenta do informacji wśród istotnych praw, z tym że nie wymieniało tego prawa 2,6% studentów pielęgniarstwa i 46,7% studentów wydziału lekarskiego.

Konieczna jest intensyfikacja kształcenia studentów (zwłaszcza wydziału lekarskiego) w zakresie praw pacjenta.

Słowa kluczowe: prawa pacjenta, studenci wyższych uczelni medycznych.

Summary

Introduction. The knowledge of patient rights is an essential component of proper realization of professional practice in medical professions. Medical University students should be prepared for their future profession in this sphere.

Objective. The major objective of the study was to collect the data related to the knowledge of patient rights among the last year medical students.

Material and methods. The study was conducted among 194 last year students completing their degree in medicine, pharmacy, nursing and public health at the Medical University of Białystok, who would soon start their professional career. The research tool used in the study was the authors' own questionnaire. It consisted of 27 questions, of which 7 were open and 20 close (2 multiple choice and 18 single choice questions). The structure of the questionnaire form was based on three principle parts. The first part concentrated on sociometric questions, the second referred to a general knowledge of patient rights, whereas the third one expanded the knowledge of one of the most essential patient rights – the right to information.

Results. The knowledge of patient rights among students is definitely insufficient. Nursing students appeared to have the greatest knowledge in this field, whereas students of medicine obtained poorer results. In students' opinion, university courses are the most important source of information on patient rights, although the amount of information acquired during studies is insufficient. Worth noting is the fact that students of Medical Faculty obtain the knowledge of patient rights during the last years of studies whilst nursing students – in their first study year. The respondents demonstrated a lack of knowledge concerning basic documents and legal acts regulating patient rights, such as the Chart of Patient's Rights or the Health Care Institution Act. Among nursing students, the knowledge of patient rights was declared by 97.4% and among students of medicine by 78.3%. Most study participants (53.6%) considered the patient right to information to be one of the most essential ones; however, 2.6% of nursing students and 46.7% of medical faculty students did not mention it at all.

It seems crucial to intensify education in the field of patient rights, especially for students of Medical Faculty.

Key words: patient rights, medical university students.

INTRODUCTION

Patient rights are an integral part of human rights. The patient realizes his rights, first of all, in relations with health care professionals (doctors, nurses and others). If the patient rights are to be fully respected, medical care providers should be acquainted with them. This knowledge is acquired through undergraduate and postgraduate education. Familiarizing students with patient rights as early as during undergraduate courses has a fundamental significance since graduated doctors/ nurses, who get into contact with patients, should be fully educated in this field. Postgraduate programs related to this matter should only concentrate on providing up-to-date information on patient rights, in particular new legal regulations.

The need for the doctor or nurse to know the patient rights after professional occupational training results from the necessity to respect these rights and from the fact that the consequences of their disrespect may be associated with bearing occupational, civil or criminal responsibility.

Investigation of the knowledge of patient rights among medical students just before starting their professional activity is possible already at the final stage of education, as it is then that they are supposed to have acquired all the necessary information in this field. Therefore, the last year students of the respective medical faculty programs seem to be suitable respondents of the study.

OBJECTIVE

The major study objective was to investigate the knowledge of patient rights among the last year students of certain faculty programs at the Medical University of Białystok. The general knowledge of patient rights and detailed knowledge of one of the most important rights – the right to information – were explored.

Furthermore, students' opinions on respecting patient rights by medical staff in Poland and on the sufficiency level of the adequate knowledge gained during medical studies were examined.

METHODOLOGY

The last year students of the Medical University of Białystok were chosen to investigate the knowledge of patient rights. They had completed practically all the courses related to patient rights, included in study curriculum: Bioethics, Health Care Law, Pharmaceutical Law, Public Health, and were soon going to start their medical career, in which practical knowledge of patient rights is required. They also had some experience in dealing with patients, gained during practical clinical classes.

The authors' own questionnaire was used as a research tool. It was anonymous and did not contain any personal data. The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions, of which 7 were open and 20 close (2 – multiple choice and 18 – single choice).

A total of 194 last year students of Medical University of Białystok (60 medical students, 70 pharmacy students, 24 public health students and 37 nursing students) took part in the study.

The questionnaire survey was approved by the deans of the respective faculties. The questionnaire forms were completed by students during lectures, and it had been initially agreed with lecturers. The forms were delivered to students at the beginning of a lecture after having explained the study objective and the way of completion. The respondents were asked to fill in the forms independently and in case of any doubt, they were offered appropriate tips. The survey was conducted between 1st December 2007 and 20th February 2008 in the afternoon hours.

The structure of the questionnaire form consisted of 3 basic parts. The first part included data concerning age, sex, place of residence, faculty program and the year of study (questions 1-4). The second part was related to the general knowledge of patient rights (questions 5-16) and included questions concerning the basic legal acts and documents regulating patient rights. Moreover, the respondents gave their opinions on respecting the patient rights. The third part of the questionnaire (questions 17-27) focused on one of the most vital patient rights – the right to information. The questionnaire completion did not exceed 30 minutes.

RESULTS

The questionnaire survey was scheduled for 301 last year students of the Medical University of Białystok. However, the form was filled in by 194 students (64%). Table 1 shows the number of students of the respective faculty programs participating in the study.

TABLE 1. Involvement of students in the survey.

Faculty program	Number of last year students	Number of study participants	% of study participants
Medicine	145	60	41.3%
Pharmacy	81	71	87.6%
Nursing	48	38	79.1%
Public Health	27	25	92.5%

Public health students had the highest percentage share in the study (92.5%), students of medicine the lowest (41.3%). The low percentage of medical students was the consequence of poor attendance at the lecture during which the questionnaire was carried out.

The mean age in the group of students was 23.8 years (range 22-30 years). There were 155 (80.3%) women and 38 (19.7%) men. The highest percentage of women (95.8%) were nursing students, the lowest (62.12%) – medical students. Among the respondents, 49.7% were from larger urban areas, 32.3% from smaller urban areas and 18.0% from rural regions.

When asked if they knew the rights patients were entitled to, 136 (70.1%) students gave "yes" reply, whereas 58 (29.9%) provided a negative answer.

Distribution of positive and negative answers in the respective faculty groups is presented in Table 2.

While the low level of knowledge of patient rights among pharmacy students (53.3% of negative answers) may result from the subject of their study program, the large gap

TABLE 2. The knowledge of patient rights among students according to the faculty program.

Faculty program	Do you know patient rights?			
	Yes		No	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Medicine	47	78.3%	13	21.7%
Pharmacy	33	46.5%	38	53.5%
Nursing	37	97.4%	1	2.6%
Public Health	19	76.0%	6	24.0%

found between the level of negative answers among medical (21.7%) and nursing students (2.6%) seems surprising. The lack of knowledge by over 20% of medical students arouses doubts on their solid professional qualifications.

The name of the document *The Chart of Patient's Rights* was known to 133 students (68.6%), and unknown to as many as 36 students (18.6%), including 7 medical (11.7%) and 3 nursing students (7.9%).

In one of the questions, students had to demonstrate a more detailed knowledge of patient rights (open question). They were asked to list the rights that were known to them. The following rights were mentioned: the right to information (53.6%), the right to medical care (52.1%), the right to choose a doctor (38.7%), the right to respect for dignity and privacy (32.0%), the right to consent/refusal of medical procedure (24.7%). It should be emphasized that as many as 75.3% respondents did not mention this latter right.

Responses of medical and nursing students are especially interesting. As many as 46.7% of students of medicine and only 2.6% of nursing students did not mention the right to information. The right to medical care was unknown to 45% of medical students and 52.6% of nursing students. The right to choose a doctor was not mentioned by 71.7% of medical students and 57.9% of nursing students. The right to respect for dignity and privacy was not recognized by 76.7% of medical students and 7.9% of nursing students. The right to consent/refusal of medical procedure was not mentioned by 71.7% of future doctors and 55.3% of nurses. Especially striking is not mentioning the right to information by nearly 50% and the right to consent to treatment by over 2/3 of the medical students taking part in the study.

Another open question referred to the source of information on patient rights. Students could list a few sources of information. Study courses appeared to be the major source of information on patient rights (68.0%), followed by the media (24.2%), the Internet (16.0%), physician (10.3%), literature (9.3%). Nursing students more often considered study courses to be the basic source of information (94.7%), as compared to medical students (75.0%).

The question about the source of knowledge of patient rights obtained during studies was answered by 137 students (Table 3).

TABLE 3. Distribution of responses to the question "What was the source of information on patient rights obtained during studies?"

Source of information	Number	Percentage
Lectures	84	60.9%
Practical classes	37	26.8%
Own initiative	16	11.6%

TABLE 4. Distribution of responses to the question "What was the source of information concerning patient rights obtained during studies?" according to the faculty program

Faculty program	Lectures		Practical classes		Own initiative	
	Nr	%	Nr	%	Nr	%
Medicine	21	42.9%	20	40.8%	8	16.3%
Pharmacy	24	75.0%	2	6.3%	6	18.8%
Nursing	20	55.6%	15	41.7%	1	2.8%
Public Health	19	90.5%	1	4.8%	1	4.8%

The distribution of responses in the respective faculty programs is presented in Table 4.

Pharmacy students and public health students, who had limited contacts with patients, gained their knowledge mainly from lectures, whereas medical and nursing students acquired the information equally from lectures and practical classes.

When asked to recall in which study year they obtained general information concerning patient rights, 73.5% of medical students stated that it was in year VI, 82.6% of pharmacy students in year V, 61.6% of public health students in year I and II, 80.6% of nursing students – in year I. It can be thus suggested that nursing students receive the information at the beginning of the university education, whereas medical students at their end.

Responses to the question concerning the level of sufficiency of the knowledge of patient rights obtained during university courses have been presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5. The level of sufficiency of the knowledge of patient rights obtained from university courses in the respective faculty program.

Faculty program	Is the information concerning patient rights provided during studies sufficient?		
	Yes	No	
Medicine	Number	21	39
	Percentage	35.0%	65.0%
Pharmacy	Number	10	54
	Percentage	15.6%	84.4%
Nursing	Number	28	10
	Percentage	73.7%	26.3%
Public Health	Number	6	19
	Percentage	24%	76.0%

Nursing is the only major, the students of which believe that the knowledge of patient rights acquired through university courses is sufficient (76.0%). In the remaining majors, the majority of students admitted having insufficient knowledge of the subject, including 65.0% of medical students.

As the Health Care Institution Act of 30 August 1991 is a fundamental legal regulation, in another question students were supposed to list the patient rights guaranteed by this law. Five patient rights from this Act (Article 19) were listed and the right to choose a doctor, which is not included in the Act, was added.

The following percentages of positive answers were obtained in relation to the respective rights:

1. the right to health care based on medical knowledge – 52.6%,
2. the right to expressing consent or refusal of a procedure – 51.8%,
3. the right to information – 69.8%,
4. the right to privacy – 61.7%,
5. the right to die in peace and dignity – 48.2%,
6. the right to choose a doctor – 62.2%.

The results seem to confirm poor knowledge of legal regulations among students. Especially surprising is the low percentage of positive responses concerning the right to consent or refusal as a major patient right.

Table 6 presents responses concerning respecting patient rights in Poland as viewed by students.

TABLE 6. Respecting patient rights in Poland in students' opinion.

Are patient rights respected by health care system in Poland?		
Response	Number	Percentage
Yes	6	3.2%
Rather yes	116	62.4%
Rather not	58	31.2%
No	6	3.2%

It should be noted that every third student doubts respecting patient rights by health care system in Poland. Responses did not differ between the faculty programs, only nursing students had a little better opinion in this aspect (responses "yes" and "rather yes" – 81.5% in total). Moreover, it is surprising that only 3% of students gave the "yes" answer.

The third part of the questionnaire contained questions concerning the patient right to information.

As many as 100% of respondents agreed that the patient had the right to being informed about the cause of his/her disease, whereas 99% gave positive replies to the question concerning the patient right to obtain information about the mode of treatment.

TABLE 7. Opinions of students on the need of informing patients about prognosis.

Faculty program	Should patients be informed about prognosis (even if prognosis is poor)?				
		Yes	Rather yes	Rather not	No
Medicine	Number	42	16	1	0
	Percentage	71.2%	27.1%	1.7%	0%
Pharmacy	Number	36	29	3	2
	Percentage	51.4%	41.4%	4.3%	2.9%
Nursing	Number	19	18	1	0
	Percentage	50.0%	47.4%	2.6%	0%
Public Health	Number	12	9	4	0
	Percentage	48.0%	36.0%	16.0%	0%

The question whether the patient should be informed about possible complications that might occur was answered positively by 97.9% students. Yet, it should be mentioned that among 4 negative replies 2 were given by medical students.

Informing about poor prognosis is one of the most difficult tasks. The opinions in this field have been presented in Table 7.

Students of medicine were the most positive about informing the patient about prognosis (71.2% of "yes" replies), whereas among nursing students the percentage of "yes" answers was considerably lower (50%). Not fully convinced ("rather yes" answer) were 27.1% of students of medicine and as many as 47.4% of students of nursing.

According to legal regulations (Article 18 of the Health Care Institution Act), the patient has the full right of access to medical documentation. Table 8 presents students' opinions concerning this right.

TABLE 8. Opinions of students concerning the patient right of access to medical documentation.

Faculty program	Should patients have access to their medical documentation?		
	Yes	No	
Medicine	Number	44	14
	Percentage	75.9%	24.1%
Pharmacy	Number	58	12
	Percentage	82.9%	17.1%
Nursing	Number	30	8
	Percentage	78.9%	21.1%
Public Health	Number	17	8
	Percentage	68.0%	32.0%

Even though the majority of students of all faculty programs recognize the patient right to the access to medical documentation, it is surprising to see as many as 24.1% of negative answers given by medical students and 21.1% by nursing students.

TABLE 9. Opinions of students concerning dependence of the scope of information on patient's health condition.

Faculty program	Can the information given to the patient depend on his/her health condition?		
	Yes	No	
Medicine	Number	53	5
	Percentage	91.4%	8.6%
Pharmacy	Number	55	15
	Percentage	78.6%	21.4%
Nursing	Number	35	3
	Percentage	92.1%	7.9%
Public Health	Number	21	4
	Percentage	84.0%	16.0%

Students' responses to the question concerning their ability to provide patients with full information about their rights confirmed the previously stated unfavorable opinion of students' knowledge in this field. As many as 84.0% of public health students, 59.3% of medical students and 36.8% of nursing students gave negative replies.

Another question concerned the dependence of the scope of information on patients' health condition. The responses have been presented in Table 9.

It should be assumed that this question was not explicitly formulated, since patient's health condition may sometimes not allow proper reception of the information. However, a conscious patient has the right to the same range of information irrespective of his/her health condition. Therefore, the high level of positive answers (91.4% of medical students and 92.1% of nursing students) to the above question, may surprise.

DISCUSSION

Every doctor and nurse shall fulfill their duties based on medical knowledge, provide information to patients concerning their health condition and obtain their consent to medical services. Complying with the above requires the knowledge of patient rights, which students are supposed to obtain during their medical courses. The basic aim of the current study was to find out to what extent last year students of the Medical University of Białystok are familiar with patient rights.

The general knowledge of patient rights was the highest among nursing students (97.4% of positive replies). As many as 21.7% of medical students gave a negative reply. This is a very high percentage, taking into account that in a short time these students are going to work at bedside as doctors and will be expected to respect these rights. In a study performed in 2004 by Sikora et al [1], 32% of medical students named at least 4 patient rights, 56% mentioned 1-3 rights and 12% of the respondents did not know any. Iwanowicz-Palus [2] in the year 2002 evaluated the knowledge of patient rights among doctors – 57.4% declared good knowledge, 34.8% – partial and 7.8% – its lack.

In 2001, Poździuch et al [3] investigated the knowledge of patient rights among hospital staff. In a group of doctors, 25.9% declared full knowledge, 34.8% – partial and 7.4% admitted not having any knowledge; among nurses – 37.1% declared full knowledge, 60% – partial and 2.8% – its lack.

Walrond et al [4] explored the knowledge of legal regulations among medical students on Barbados in 2006. In their study, 16.4% of respondents admitted not having any knowledge, 76.4% had limited knowledge and only 7.2% considered it to be sufficient.

The above data seem to indicate that the knowledge of patient rights among students of the Medical University of Białystok, although insufficient, is comparable to that demonstrated by other studies.

What may be the responsible for the existing unsatisfactory state? It seems that the major cause is inadequate study curricula, especially with respect to the field of medicine, which lacks obligatory classes in medical law, including patient rights. This has been confirmed by better knowledge of the rights by nursing students, as shown in the current study.

For the majority of respondents, university courses and then the media were the major source of knowledge concerning patient rights. Similar observations were made by Sikora et al [1], although the contribution of university education to the students' knowledge was smaller (38%) and of the media – greater (30%) than in the current study.

The current study revealed insufficient knowledge of the patient rights outlined by the Health Care Institution Act among students. In the study [1], only 3% of the responding students declared being familiar with the Act, whereas in the study [3] – 29.6% of doctors and 20% of nurses had this knowledge.

In the current study, most students expressed positive opinions concerning observance of the patient rights in Poland (“yes” and “rather yes” responses). Similar findings were obtained in the study [3], in which 74.0% of doctors and 88.5% of nurses claimed that the patient rights in Poland were fully or partly respected, whereas according to 22.2% of doctors and 11.4% of nurses, they were disobeyed.

The majority of the responding students considered their knowledge of patient rights to be insufficient. In a study by Dąbrowski et al. performed among the last year medical students in the year 2005 [5], 10% admitted that their skill of conveying bad news to patients was very poor, 33% – poor, 40% – average and only 17% – good.

Summing up, the results obtained in the current study do not differ significantly from the findings reported by other authors. This seems to suggest that generally the knowledge of patient rights among students of medical schools in Poland is insufficient and that the situation has to be improved.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The questionnaire findings indicate that the knowledge of patient rights among the last year medical students is insufficient; this especially refers to the students of medicine.
2. The knowledge of patient rights was the highest among nursing students.
3. Apart from nursing students, over 2/3 of students of other faculty programs admit that the information on patient rights is insufficient.
4. Nearly half of the students, except for those doing a degree in nursing, think that health care workers in Poland do not respect patient rights.
5. Almost all the respondents agree to providing information to patients about their health problems, although most of them are against making medical documentation available to patients.
6. It seems necessary to broaden students' education concerning patient rights and to include it in the study curriculum, especially in the field of medicine.

REFERENCES

1. Sikora D, Poździuch S, Mikos M, Czupryna A. Znajomość praw pacjenta wśród studentów medycyny. *Zdr Zarz.* 2004;6(2):48-53.
2. Iwanowicz-Palus G. Znajomość praw pacjenta. *Zdr Publ.* 2002; 112(3).
3. Poździuch S, Kucharska L, Padło S, Przyboś E. Znajomość praw pacjenta wśród personelu szpitali i pacjentów. *Zdr Zarz.* 2001;3(2): 35-46.

4. Walrond ER, Jonnalagadda R, Hariharan S, Moseley HSL. Knowledge, attitudes, and practice of medical students at the Cave Hill Campus in relation to ethics and law in healthcare. *West Indian Med J.* 2006;55(1):42-7.
5. Dąbrowski S, Nosowicz W, Wawrzyniak A, Horst-Sikorka W. Samocena studentów VI roku medycyny dotycząca kompetencji komunikacyjnych niezbędnych w relacji lekarz – pacjent. *Fam Med Prim Care Rev.* 2005;7(3):626-31.

Informacje o Autorach

Mgr KATARZYNA SOBOLEWSKA, dr n. med. JACEK A. PIĄTKIEWICZ – adiunkt, dr hab. n. med. ANDRZEJ SZPAK – kierownik, mgr DOROTA HUZARSKA – asystent, Zakład Zdrowia Publicznego Uniwersytetu Medycznego w Białymstoku.

Adres do korespondencji

Zakład Zdrowia Publicznego
Uniwersytet Medyczny w Białymstoku
ul. I Armii Wojska Polskiego 2/2
15-103 Białystok