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RESEARCH ARTICLE

KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE ABOUT HIV INFECTION AMONG MEDICAL STUDENTS AT  
GOVERNMENT GENERAL HOSPITAL, ANANTHAPURAMU

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ABSTRACT

**Aim and Objective:** To assess the knowledge and attitudes of medical students towards patients suffering with HIV/AIDS. To determine if students felt adequately prepared to deal with medical and psychological aspects of HIV/AIDS.

**Methodology:** the study was conducted in a questionnaire based pattern at Government Medical College, Anantapuramu, including MBBS students of all the semesters. A structured questionnaire was distributed to all the medical students of each year. The questionnaires regarding knowledge were focused on various methods of transmission, high risk behaviours and preventive measures. Attitude towards HIV/AIDS patients, sexual behaviours, condom usage, sex education and resource allocation for HIV/AIDS patients were assessed.

**Results:** A change in the knowledge from 1st to 4th year was seen in the following aspects: knowledge regarding vertical transmission (78% to 93.3%), transmission through Breast feeding (31.9% to 85.3%), tuberculosis as the most common opportunistic infection in HIV/AIDS (26.9% to 70%), correct time of initiation of PEP (5% to 46.7%), facility for getting HIV test done confidentially (0.6% to 42.7%). An increasing trend in the negative attitude towards HIV patients was seen from 1st to 4th year when it came to right to refuse surgical treatment to HIV patient (40% to 56%) and an increasing trend in the favourable response towards HIV patients were seen from 1st year to 4th year when it came to their opinion whether HIV patients can be kept in general Ward (57.5% to 78%).

**Conclusions:** From the above study we conclude that the knowledge level on HIV/AIDS improved based on year of study. Discriminatory attitude towards HIV patients still persisted among students of all the years.

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INTRODUCTION

Human immunodeficiency virus is a major public health challenge with an estimated 2.24 million persons living with HIV in India. On the Asian sub-continent, an estimated 4.87 million people were living with HIV in 2009 (UNAIDS, 2010). Health education, particularly Information Education & Communication (IEC) and attitude and knowledge about the disease is the key strategies for controlling this epidemic. In the light of evidence that HIV/AIDS cases are continuously increasing in the developing countries like India, healthcare professionals are required to be adequately trained, so that they can play a pivotal role in controlling this pandemic. Even though it is widely accepted that healthcare professionals play a crucial role in prevention and control of HIV/AIDS, less attention has been given to assess knowledge and attitude of the healthcare professionals.

Few studies have reported stigma & discrimination by healthcare professionals while treating HIV- positive patients. Results of the study revealed that about one sixth of HIV-positive patients were denied treatment (UNDP, 2010). Similarly, lack of knowledge about transmission of HIV was observed among the healthcare professionals working in government hospitals in India. That study had identified serious knowledge gaps among medical persons leading to refusal of treatment to persons living with HIV (Maimaiti et al., 2010). There are reports of reluctance by dentists in treating patients, including refusal to treat (Basavayyabn et al., 2005). In another study, dentists reported fear of getting infected, non-cooperation of support staff and perceived-lack of clinical skills as barriers to treating HIV positives (Benora et al., 1992). A study on MBBS students has shown certain misconceptions among them such as urine is being potential source of infection. About 90% students stressed for HIV testing for patients before admission, 60% were not willing for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and 40% were unwilling to assist in surgical procedures on HIV/AIDS patients (Mohsin et al.,

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2010). Students from medical, dental and allied health professions are to be sensitized on the knowledge pertaining to HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention. It is also necessary that these future healthcare workers should inculcate healthy attitude towards persons living with HIV/AIDS. However, there are limited studies which have explored knowledge and attitudes of healthcare students pertaining to HIV/AIDS, particularly in the eastern part of India. Keeping this in view, a study was conducted to assess the knowledge & attitudes related to HIV/AIDS among medical and allied health sciences students.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was a questionnaire based study conducted among the medical students at the Government Medical College, Anantapuramu. A detailed structured questionnaire was distributed to all the medical students from first year to fourth year of MBBS course after explaining the aims of the study and obtaining verbal consents from them. All participants were clearly advised that participation in this survey was voluntary. The students were given 1 hour to respond to the questionnaires. Questions about modes of transmission, treatment, risk of acquiring HIV infection (occupational risk), sources of information and whether they had received any training on HIV/AIDS or not. Responses were recorded in terms of "true", "false" or "don't know". The attitude scale consisted of questions about students' attitude; such as willingness to treat HIV-positive persons, ethics while treating the HIV-positive patients, adoption of precautionary measures (using protective attires) and training needs pertaining to HIV/AIDS.

## RESULTS

A total of 390 students were included in the study, 100 first year, 97 second year, 95 third year and 98 fourth year students. A change in the knowledge from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year was seen in the following aspects: knowledge regarding vertical transmission (78% to 93.3%), transmission through Breast feeding (31.9% to 85.3%), tuberculosis as the most common opportunistic infection in HIV/AIDS (26.9% to 70%), correct time of initiation of post exposure prophylaxis (5% to 46.7%), facility for getting HIV test done confidentially (0.6% to 42.7%). An increasing trend in the negative attitude towards HIV patients was seen from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year when it came to right to refuse surgical treatment ton HIV patient (40% to 56%). An increasing trend in the favourable response towards HIV patients were seen from 1<sup>st</sup> year to 4<sup>th</sup> year when it came to their opinion whether HIV patients can be kept in general Ward (57.5% to 78%).

## DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the medical students of 19-25 years of age. The knowledge and attitudes of this population play a major role in the health care system of a country as they are the future health care providers who would be responsible for

imparting their knowledge and educating the public regarding HIV/AIDS information, modes of disease transmission, high risk sexual behaviours as well as effective preventive measures. In this study, all the respondents recognized the major routes of transmission of HIV/AIDS infection such as transfusion of infected blood and blood products, unprotected sexual intercourse with an infected person. The great majority also knew that HIV is not transmitted by sharing utensils, close physical contact like hugging, handshaking and contact through saliva or sweat. Media has always played a strong role in raising basic awareness on various health issues including HIV/AIDS. Regarding precautionary measures, the overall knowledge of all the participants was found to be very low, more than 50% of the participants are unaware of the fact that latex gloves could provide protection against accidental exposure to HIV infection. Because of this knowledge gap, healthcare professionals might refrain from using protective measures while handling HIV cases and they may also avoid treating HIV patients.

## Conclusion

The overall knowledge among the medical students was good, few minorities of the Students held some misconceptions. There is a strong need for motivation of HIV related education right from the beginning of medical curriculum so as to remove misconceptions among students. Another Area that needs to be addressed is the attitude of students towards people living With HIV. There is a need for medical colleges to create an environment that is conducive to the development of appropriate Student attitude towards HIV. Further such studies must be conducted involving all branches of health Care so as to prepare health science students to handle HIV/AIDS patients better and also contribute to health education in society.

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