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An Investigation into the Attitudes and Awareness Pertaining to Dignity, Respect, and Bioethical Considerations for Human Corpse Among Undergraduate Medical Students.

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ABSTRACT

Death signifies the irreversible cessation of all biological functions that sustain a living organism. Following biological death, the handling of the deceased body involves various individuals, including the general public, family members, law enforcement, medical professionals, and mortuary staff. Upholding the decedent's dignity aligns with legal mandates and bioethical imperatives. While India lacks specific legislation for protecting the rights of the deceased, judicial decisions recognize the right to dignity even after death. Medical graduates must adhere to ethical protocols for managing human remains. The study emphasizes the need for respectful handling of cadavers among future medical practitioners.

This pilot study evaluated medical student's attitudes and awareness regarding the dignity and respect for human cadavers. Conducted at Government Doon Medical College, Dehradun, in December 2022, the research obtained ethical approvals and participant consent. The questionnaire, consisting of 10 questions related to bioethical awareness and the handling of deceased bodies, received responses from 172 students.

The results were analysed descriptively. The study underscores the ongoing need to enhance awareness among both educated individuals and the general population in India.

Keywords: Corpse Dignity, Bioethics, Dead body respect, Human remains

INTRODUCTION

Death is the irreversible cessation of all biological functions that sustain a living organism. ¹Upon the biological death of an individual, the deceased body may be subjected to contact and manipulation by a myriad of individuals, including the general populace, kin, law enforcement, medical professionals performing autopsies, the attending physicians prior to death, organ procurement teams, and mortuary personnel etc. As the cadaver undergoes various processes preceding the final rites, it is vitally important to uphold the decedent's dignity in accordance with the plethora of legal mandates and bioethical imperatives. While a multitude of legal documents and directives exist to govern the ethical handling of human remains, the interpretation and justification of the mandate to "Treat human corpses with dignity" remain somewhat nebulous. ²

In India, specific legislation dedicated to safeguarding the rights of the deceased is notably absent. However, the judiciary has consistently emphasized the imperative of upholding dignity and protecting the rights of the deceased. A pivotal moment in this regard occurred when the Supreme Court of India, in the landmark case of *Parmanand Katara v. Union of India* (1989), acknowledged that the right to life, equitable treatment, and dignity extends not only to the living but also to their mortal remains. These rights find their roots in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. Moreover, the recognition of posthumous legal rights confers significant moral standing upon the deceased within our legal framework. The law further endeavours to honour the decedent's wishes and safeguard their interests. Whether arising from natural or unnatural causes (such as accidents, suicides, or homicides), it is incumbent upon the State to protect the rights of the deceased and prevent any transgressions against their remains. ³

India, with its expansive cultural tapestry, replete with an array of rituals, customs, and belief systems, presents a unique context regarding dealing with the dead. In India, respect for the dead is deeply ingrained in the culture and is reflected in various practices and rituals. Prior to the cessation of life, family members frequently engage as proactive contributors in the decision-making processes regarding treatment, extend emotional solace to the patient, and render tangible caregiving. Subsequent to death, it is incumbent upon physicians to ethically manage the decedent's remains in a manner that aligns with the expressed desires of the patient or their kin. From a legal perspective, the family possesses a limited proprietary interest in the deceased's body. ⁴ The dereliction of these duties has the

potential to cause affront to the bereaved relatives and erode the commonly upheld confidence in the steadfastness of medical practitioners.

It has been observed that various officials and staff members tasked with the handling of cadavers may not consistently adhere to the ethical standards required in the treatment of the deceased. Medical graduates, particularly those in the MBBS program who will encounter cadavers under various circumstances, are obligated to adhere to a standardized and ethical protocol for the management of human remains. This directive is not only enshrined within the MBBS curriculum in India but also carries an ethical obligation to enlighten others on this matter. The present study aims to illuminate the necessity for enhancements in the respectful handling of human remains amongst medical students, who are the prospective medical practitioners of tomorrow.

Materials and methods

The research presented is part of a pilot study aimed at assessing attitudes and awareness regarding the dignity and respect for human corpse among various demographic groups, with the objective of generating hypotheses to enhance the understanding of the biology of death and foster respect for the deceased. The study was conducted with medical students at Government Doon Medical College, Dehradun, in December 2022. Institutional ethics committee approval and participant informed consent were secured prior to the study's initiation. Medical students who declined participation or were unavailable on the data collection day were excluded. The questionnaire, developed after a review of relevant literature and faculty consultation, comprised 10 questions focused on bioethical awareness, and the respect and dignity afforded to the dead body of deceased during handling. It featured multiple-choice questions and was distributed in print to students, with responses collected within a designated timeframe and compiled into an Excel spreadsheet. A total of 172 students participated (Male-84&Female-88), and the results were tabulated and descriptively analysed, presenting the data in terms of frequency.

Results

Figure 1

1. Dead body should be handled respectfully & with dignity during Post-mortem Examination		
Not necessary,	0	0.00%
it's duty of morgue attendants,	13	7.56%
it's job of the police,	11	6.40%
Must for all.	148	86.05%
2. Right to life with dignity under Indian Constitution should also extend to right to dignity for dead.		
Unnecessary,	5	2.91%
when requested by Relatives,	16	9.30%
if made mandated by the state,	26	15.12%
true for all.	125	72.67%
3. The Hospital administration should deliberately retain any dead body.		
Yes, if hospital wants,	12	6.98%
if bill payment pending,	3	1.74%
hand over to the family or civic body immediately,	84	48.84%
let the police decide	72	41.86%
4. Is it ethical for citizens to use dead bodies as baits for pursuing their demands?		
Yes,	7	4.07%
only to meet public demand,	13	7.56%
only against administrative atrocities,	17	9.88%
Never	135	78.49%
5. Hiding the external appearance of the deceased and the incisions on the body after autopsy examination while handing over the body to the family/relatives:		
it's duty of police,	20	11.63%
should be done by relatives,	8	4.65%
not necessary,	19	11.05%
should be done by autopsy team	125	72.67%

Figure 2

6. Would it be ethical and dignified to make organ donation mandatory by the deceased for everyone in India?		
Yes, for all,	24	13.95%
Not at all,	31	18.02%
only except already written unwillingness of deceased,	50	29.07%
only on permission from relatives	67	38.95%
7. In cases of death in severely burnt/charred, mutilated, crushed, and scattered, death due to sexual offences, decomposed bodies,- the body of the deceased must be collected, covered & handled with respect:		
Not necessary till Autopsy Examination,	9	5.23%
must be done by local public,	36	20.93%
must be done by police,	53	30.81%
should wait for forensic team	74	43.02%
8. Regarding Media about right to privacy and dignity of deceased:		
people can take photo/videos to make others aware,	2	1.16%
people should avoid sharing photographs,	44	25.58%
journalists should be allowed to share,	27	15.70%
must be avoided by media & social media	99	57.56%
9. In cases where the family members are not in a position to perform last cultural rites or in unidentified bodies:		
it must be done by local public,	16	9.30%
must be done by NGOs,	36	20.93%
State/ Local administration should perform the last rites,	104	60.47%
should only be done by people of same religion	16	9.30%
10. Regarding right to dignity of the dead, - Mass burial/ cremation:		
should not be allowed,	21	12.21%
should be allowed,	75	43.60%
only allowed with same religion,	29	16.86%
let police decide	47	27.33%

Discussion

In India, the legal framework lacks specific statutes dedicated to the protection of the rights of the deceased. Nonetheless, Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, which enshrines the Right to Life, encompasses a broad spectrum of an individual's existence, including the Right to Dignity. Through a series of judicial pronouncements by the Supreme Court and various High Courts, this right has been expansively interpreted to include deceased individuals as well.³ Notable cases that illustrate this extension include *Parmanand Katara v. Union of India* (1989), *Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan v. Union of India* (2002), and *P. Rathinam v. Union of India* (1994). Furthermore, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, in a resolution adopted in 2005, emphasized the imperative of dignified treatment of human remains, which entails proper management, disposal, and consideration for the bereaved families' needs.⁵ The UN's Inter-Agency Standing Committee has also set forth Operational Guidelines on Human Rights and Natural Disasters, advocating for measures that facilitate the restitution of remains to family members. These guidelines endorse the provision for the recovery of human remains to enable future identification and, if necessary, reburial.⁶

The investigation, encompassing 84 male and 88 female students (totaling 172), revealed that 86% concurred that irrespective of an individual's status, deceased bodies should be treated with respect and dignity. Conversely, 14% believed this to be the responsibility of specific personnel. A significant 73% advocated for the extension of the 'right to life with dignity' under the Indian Constitution to include the 'right to dignity in death,' resonating with various judicial decisions by the Supreme and High Courts of India. In contrast, 27% deemed this extension less or unnecessary. Opinions were split regarding the deliberate retention of deceased bodies by hospital administrations; 49% recommended immediate handover to the family or civic authorities, while 48% deferred to police discretion. A minority of 7% supported the hospital administration's stance. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India advisory stating that hospitals should be categorically forbidden from withholding bodies due to unsettled financial obligations, urging that bodies be transferred to the family or civic bodies in a respectful manner.³ Concerning the use of deceased bodies as leverage by citizens to advance their demands, 78% agreed this practice should be unequivocally condemned, although 17% supported it as a form of protest against injustices. The NHRC strictly prohibits the use of bodies as bargaining tools.³ Furthermore, 73% of students understood that hiding post-autopsy external alterations falls under the purview of the autopsy team, which is in accordance with NHRC guidelines. In the discourse on mandated organ donation within India, a minority of 14% advocated for its universal imposition, while 18% opposed any form of compulsion. The majority, constituting 68%, favored a mandatory approach contingent upon either documented refusal or familial

consent. Under the Transplantation of Human Organ Act (THOA) of 1994, in India, organ donation is not enforced for everyone, however, international precedents exist. For instance, Singapore's legislation presumes consent for organ donation in the absence of registered objection. This presumption is also prevalent in several European nations, including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Greece, Norway, Switzerland, Spain, and Sweden, where familial consent is typically pursued.⁷In instances of severe bodily trauma, such as extensive burns, mutilation, or deaths resulting from sexual offenses, the consensus on the handling of remains is divided: 21% suggest intervention by the local public, 31% by police authorities, and 43% by forensic specialists. The National Disaster Management Guidelines advocate that the management of such cases is a principal societal obligation of governmental entities.⁸Regarding the media's role in preserving the privacy and dignity of the deceased, 58% of respondents believe that the dissemination of images or videos should be universally prohibited. A contrasting 26% feel that such restrictions should apply solely to the general populace, and 16% opine that only journalists should have dissemination privileges. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) stipulates that the media, inclusive of social platforms, must avoid the display of explicit imagery of the deceased and employ masking techniques to safeguard the deceased's right to privacy and dignity.³In scenarios where the deceased's relatives are unavailable, the NHRC acknowledges that state or local administrations may conduct the last rites, with due consideration of religious and cultural practices—a stance supported by 60% of students, while 40% dissent. As for mass burials or cremations, opinions are split: 44% endorse the practice, a mere 12% outright reject it, 17% conditionally accept it based on religious homogeneity, and 27% defer to law enforcement discretion. The NHRC's guidelines, however, assert that mass burials or cremations contravene the intrinsic dignity owed to the deceased.³

Conclusion

The discussion and debate surrounding awareness of dignity and respect for deceased bodies gained prominence during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. During this global crisis, the

dignity and rights of the deceased and their families were often overlooked. Despite the far-reaching impact of this issue, there remains a pressing need to enhance awareness among both educated individuals and the general populace in India.

Declarations

Ethical Clearance: Ethical Clearance was obtained from Institutional Ethics Committee, Government Doon Medical College Dehradun prior to the study. Consent was taken from each respondent. Confidentiality was maintained.

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Conflict of Interest: Nil

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