Knowledge and Attitude of Egyptian Medical Students toward Pursuing a Career in Forensic Medicine

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KEYWORDS
Forensic Medicine,
Career choice,
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Attitude,
Egypt.

ABSTRACT

Forensic medicine is a crucial field in both healthcare and legal systems. Students' knowledge and interest in choosing forensic medicine as a career are not clear. Therefore, we aim to assess the current knowledge and attitudes of Egyptian undergraduate medical students and interns toward pursuing forensic medicine as a future career. A cross-sectional study using a self-administered questionnaire that was pilot tested was conducted at the Faculty of Medicine, Menoufia University, Egypt. During the academic year 2022/2023, undergraduate students (from the fifth and sixth years) and interns, were randomly selected and invited to fill in an online questionnaire. We received 259 valid responses. Most of the responders were females (59.1%) and in the fifth year (35.5%). 93.4% of the students expressed a high to moderate level of knowledge. The faculty curriculum was the main source of knowledge for 60.2% of them. Only 84 students (32.4%) showed a positive attitude toward forensic medicine as a specialty. 28.19% of the students will choose forensic medicine as one of the specialties to train in during their internship year, while 26.3% consider it a potential career option after graduation. no correlation was found between the total scores of participants' knowledge and their total attitude scores. A decent percentage had a good knowledge of forensic medicine. However, it was not a preferred future career option for most of them. More efforts are needed to raise awareness about forensic medicine as a career choice among medical students in Egypt.

Introduction

Forensic medicine is a well-established speciality in modern medicine that involves the application of medical expertise to the legal system (Vanezis, 2004). Forensic medicine practitioners play a vital role by offering expert guidance to law enforcement during medicolegal investigations. Forensic medicine is a unique medical specialty by dealing with patients while being alive and after their death (Garland and Little, 2018; Eze and Ojifinni, 2022; Singh et al., 2022).

Forensic medicine is a mandatory part of curriculum at all faculties of medicine in Egypt (Kharoshah et al., 2011). Medical students should receive guidance on their future legal responsibilities in practicing medicine (Magalhães et al., 2014). In addition, effective teaching at the undergraduate level may significantly influence students' attitude toward forensic medicine and considering it as a future career (Madadin, 2013). Students may acquire knowledge about forensic medicine from scientific sources such as academic courses, as well as non-scientific sources. The increasing number and popularity of television shows and media reports on forensics worldwide provide access to

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information and experiences of professionals, which can enhance students' understanding (Madadin, 2013).

While forensic medical experts are not the only ones involved in forensic work, all physicians may come across medico-legal issues. Therefore, a strong education in legal matters is necessary for medical practitioners (Madadin et al., 2016). Additionally, there are instances where doctors serve as expert witnesses in medico-legal cases. Those working in forensic medicine require additional training to carry out their duties as experts (González et al., 2005). The scarcity of proficient forensic medicine specialists has raised concerns, resulting in significant implications for both healthcare and legal systems (Cattaneo et al., 2024).

This study aimed to assess the current knowledge and attitudes of pursuing forensic medicine as a specialty and a future career among undergraduate medical students (5^{th} and 6^{th} years) and among interns at Faculty of Medicine, Menoufia University.

Materials and Methods

The current study was a questionnaire-based cross-sectional study performed on undergraduate medical students (from the fifth and sixth years) and interns at Faculty of Medicine, Menoufia University during the academic year 2022 / 2023. The exclusion criteria were non-Egyptian students, undergraduates who have not studied forensic medicine, and graduate students. The approximate total number included in the target population was approximately 2280 students. So, the sample size to study the results of the current study with a significant $P<0.05$ is calculated according to this formula:

$$n \geq \frac{Z^2_{1-\alpha/2} \times p(1-p)}{d^2}$$

Z1-α/2 = 1.96, p = 0.178, d (absolute error) = 0.05. So, n = 225, and by adding 10% as a drop-out rate, it resulted in a total sample size of ≥ 248 students. The sample was evenly divided equally between all study years, with 165 participants randomly selected from each year based on lists of registered student names.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 10/2022FORE20) of the Ethical Committee of Faculty of Medicine, Menoufia University. All selected students participating in this study received a detailed explanation about the aim, objectives and methodology of the study before obtaining their concent to participate in the study. All identifiable data collected, processed and stored for the purposes of the study remained confidential at all times.

Questionnaire development

The questionnaire was developed by the research team after extensive literature review. The questionnaire was then revised by a forensic medicine specialist and a statistician. The questionnaire underwent a pilot testing on 20 students at the Faculty of Medicine, Menoufia University to assess its clarity. Tool's reliability was tested using test-retest reliability. The internal consistency for the total questionnaire was tested and Cronbach alpha coefficient was 0.89.

The questionnaire consisted of 4 parts: the first part included questions about sociodemographic data, the second part contained 16 questions to test knowledge,

with 15 questions answered as (yes, no, or I don't know), question 16 was about the main source of information about forensic medicine. The third part contained 10 questions for attitude, with a 3 point Likert scale answer. The fourth part was a 5 point Likert scale about the likelihood of choosing forensic medicine as a career choice.

Data collection

We followed a planned sampling technique to randomly selected a sample of 165 students from these lists for each study year. Between 1st of January and 31st of March 2023, the selected participants were invited to participate in the questionnaire via their social media profiles. They were assigned a unique code and provided with a message containing information about the study objectives and link to the questionnaire. If not received a formal reply within three days, a first reminder was sent, and if no response was received, a second reminder was sent one week later. Those who did not respond to these reminders were considered as non-responders. After achieving the accepted response rate, the data were collected in a google spreadsheet and accessed only by the study investigators.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows version 26 (IBM Corp., Armonk, N.Y., USA). Frequencies and percentages were used to present descriptive statistics. The association between qualitative variables was analyzed using the Chi-square test. For the knowledge questions, scores of each statement ranged from 0 for don't know & incorrect responses to 1 for correct response. The total score of the knowledge ranged from 0 to 15; a score more than 10 indicates good knowledge (> 70%), a score from 7 to 10 indicates moderate knowledge (50%:70%), and a score less than 7 indicates poor knowledge (< 50%). Regarding attitude questions, scores of each statement were 0 for "disagree", 1 for "neutral" and 2 for "agree". The total attitude score ranged from 0 to 20; a score more than 14 indicates positive attitude (> 70 %), a score from 10 to 14 indicates neutral attitude (50%:70%), and a score less than 10 indicates negative attitude (< 50%). The five-point Likert scale for career question was collapsed into three categories (agree, neutral, and disagree). Pearson correlation was calculated between the total knowledge and attitude scores. All tests were bilateral, and a p-value of 0.05 was used as the cutpoint of statistical significance.

Results

Characteristics of the participants

We received 259 valid responses. The majority of responders were females (153; 59.1%). 5th academic year students represented 36.3% of students (94 students), 92 (35.5%) were in their 6th academic year, and 73 (28.2%) were in the internship year (Table 1).

Table (1): Characteristics of the participants:

Variables	Total participants (n=259)
Gender	
Males	106 (40.9%)
Females	153 (59.1%)
Age (years)	
Mean ±SD	24.22±1.06
Range	22.00-29.00
Academic year	
Fifth year	94 (36.3%)
Sixth year	92 (35.5%)
Medical interns	73 (28.2%)

n= number, SD= standard deviation

Knowledge of forensic medicine

Among the students sample, 134 (51.7%) students expressed good knowledge about forensic medicine speciality, while 108 (41.7%) students were rated to have moderate knowledge, and only 17 (6.6%) of them had poor knowledge (Figure 1). Only 47 (18.15%) students could differentiate between the roles of crime scene investigator and forensic physician. Moreover, 255 (98.46%) correctly stated that forensic medicine physician can diagnose homicidal cases and determine the causative weapon by examination of wounds. Interestingly, 164 (63.32%) students reported their knowledge of how to write medico-legal reports in the emergency room. Detailed results of students' knowledge twords forensic medicine specialty are expressed in (Table 2).

When asked about the main source of information about forensic medicine, 60.2% of the students stated that the faculty curriculum was their main source, followed by scientific books (15.4%) (Figure 2).

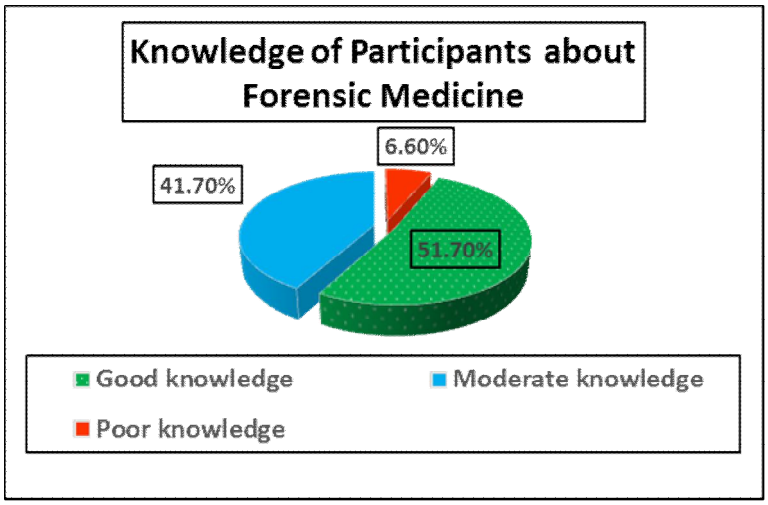

Fig. (1): Level of knowledge of the participants about forensic medicine

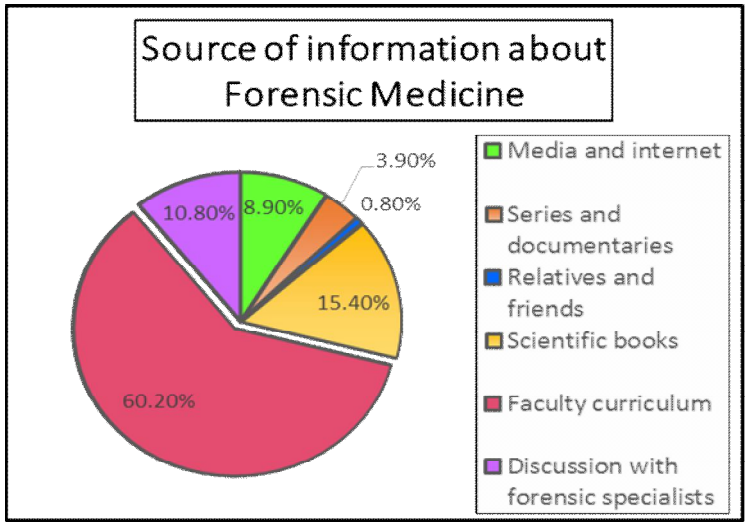

Fig. (2): Source of information about forensic medicine

Table (2): Knowledge of medical students and interns toward forensic medicine specialty

	Yes	I don't know	No
Forensic medicine can be used in the legal system.	257 (99.23%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.77%)
Crime scene investigator and forensic physician have the same role.	47 (18.15%)	30 (11.58%)	182 (70.27%)
Forensic science subspecialties are three: Forensic Toxicology, Anthropology and Serology.	109 (42.08%)	96 (37.07%)	54 (20.85%)
Forensic medicine physician deals only with dead bodies.	10 (3.86%)	6 (2.32%)	243 (93.82%)
Forensic medicine physician can determine the time of death accurately.	225 (86.87%)	3 (1.16%)	31 (11.97%)
An autopsy is an examination of a dead body.	181 (69.88%)	62 (23.94%)	16 (6.18%)
The predominant cases seen in forensic medicine are rape cases.	57 (22.01%)	109 (42.08%)	93 (35.91%)
Forensic medicine physician can diagnose homicidal cases.	255 (98.46%)	2 (0.77%)	2 (0.77%)
Forensic medicine physician can determine the causative weapon by examination of wounds.	255 (98.46%)	1 (0.39%)	3 (1.16%)
Taking consent from the patient for treatment is a necessary procedure.	245 (94.59%)	10 (3.86%)	4 (1.54%)
In forensic medicine practice, samples and swabs can yield valuable information.	239 (92.28%)	13 (5.02%)	7 (2.70%)
Samples and swabs are taken antemortem only.	7 (2.70%)	19 (7.34%)	233 (89.96%)
Medicolegal samples are less likely to be tampered with if every step of sample handling is properly documented.	105 (40.54%)	120 (46.33%)	34 (13.13%)
Toxicologists treat addicts and overdosed patients only.	35 (13.51%)	6 (2.32%)	218 (84.17%)
Do you know how to write medico-legal reports in the emergency room?	164 (63.32%)	-	95 (36.68%)

Attitudes toward forensic medicine

Students who showed a positive attitude toward forensic medicine as a specialty represented 32.4% (84 students), while 122 (47.1%) students had a neutral attitude, and one-fifth of them (53; 20.5%) showed negative attitude (Figure 3). About one-quartile of the students (25.48%) agreed that information they got from the faculty curriculum about forensic medicine and its sub-specialties was enough. Moreover, 176 (67.95%) students reported the need of more education about forensic medicine and its sub-specialties, and 208 (80.31%) think they will need additional educational programs on managing medico-legal cases in their future medical practice (Table 3).

Only 73 (28.19%) students will choose forensic medicine as one of the specialties to train in during their internship year. Considering choosing forensic medicine as a future career, 68 (26.3%) students consider forensic medicine as one of their potential career options after graduation. However, only 53 (20.46%) students thought working as a forensic physician is a well-paid job, and 187 (72.20%) students think forensic medicine in Egypt is a limited specialty that doesn't enable private practice after training. In addition, 129 (49.8%) disagreed that opportunities for working abroad are available to forensic physicians compared with other medical specialties. Detailed results of students' attitude twords forensic medicine specialty are expressed in (Table 3). The compensation of working as a forensic physician and opportunities for working abroad have a significant impact on the students' attutide twords forensic medicine specialty ($p < 0.05$) (Table 4).

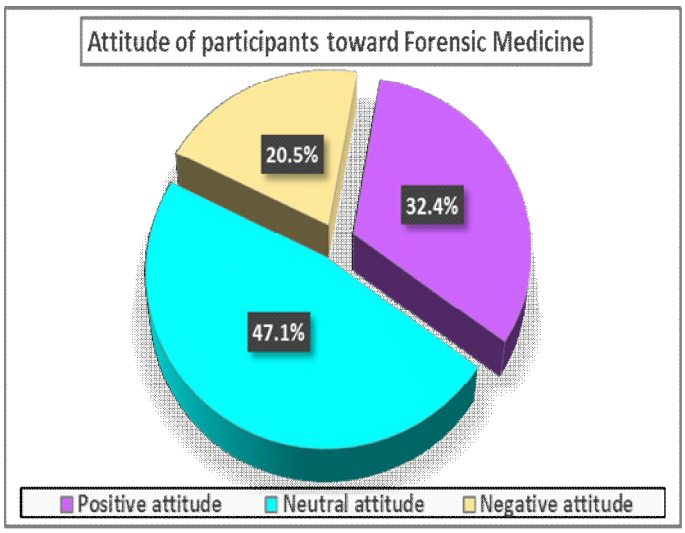

Fig. (3): Attitude of the participants toward forensic medicine (N.B: Negative attitude < 50% of total attitude score, Neutral attitude 50%-70% of total attitude score, Positive attitude >70% of total attitude score).

Table (3): Attitude of medical students and interns toward forensic medicine specialty {number (percentage)}

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The information I got from the faculty curriculum about forensic medicine and its sub-specialties was enough.	66 (25.48%)	144 (55.60%)	49 (18.92%)
I need more education about forensic medicine and its sub-specialties.	176 (67.95%)	55 (21.24%)	28 (10.81%)
The rules that organize medico-legal practice are clear for me.	72 (27.80%)	123 (47.49%)	64 (24.71%)
I think studying forensic medicine will protect me from future medico-legal problems.	178 (68.73%)	63 (24.32%)	18 (6.95%)
I think I will need additional educational programs on managing medico-legal cases in my future medical practice.	208 (80.31%)	36 (13.90%)	15 (5.79%)
In the internship year, I will choose forensic medicine and Toxicology as one of the specialties to train in.	73 (28.19%)	93 (35.91%)	93 (35.91%)
I think working as a forensic physician is a well-paid job.	53 (20.46%)	112 (43.24%)	94 (36.29%)
I think forensic medicine in Egypt is a limited specialty that doesn't enable private practice.	187 (72.20%)	50 (19.31%)	22 (8.49%)
I think the opportunities for working abroad are available to forensic physicians compared with other medical specialties.	53 (20.46%)	119 (45.95%)	87 (33.59%)
Forensic Medicine can be one of your potential career options after graduation	68 (26.3%)	62 (23.9%)	129 (49.8%)

Table (4): Factors affecting participants' attitude toward forensic medicine specialty

	Attitude categories			P value
	Positive (n=84)	Neutral (n=122)	Negative (n=53)	
Working as a forensic physician is a well-paid job				
Agree	25 (29.8%)	22 (18.0%)	6 (11.3%)	
Neutral	45 (53.6%)	52 (42.6%)	15 (28.3%)	**0.000**
Disagree	14 (16.7%)	48 (39.3%)	32 (60.4%)	
Forensic medicine in Egypt does not enable private practice				
Agree	67 (79.8%)	87 (71.3%)	33 (62.3%)	
Neutral	15 (17.9%)	23 (18.9%)	12 (22.6%)	0.07
Disagree	2 (2.4%)	12 (9.8%)	8 (15.1%)	
Opportunities for working abroad are available to forensic physicians				
Agree	28 (33.3%)	19 (15.6%)	6 (11.3%)	
Neutral	40 (47.6%)	63 (51.6%)	16 (30.2%)	**0.000**
Disagree	16 (19.0%)	40 (32.8%)	31 (58.5%)	

n= number. Compraison was made using Chi-square test

Table (5): Total knowledge and attitude of the studied participants in relation to their gender (n=259)

	Gender		P value
	Males (n=106)	Females (n=153)	
Knowledge			
Good knowledge	63 (59.4%)	71 (46.4%)	
Moderate knowledge	32 (30.2%)	76 (49.7%)	0.003*
Poor knowledge	11 (10.4%)	6 (3.9%)	
Attitude			
Positive attitude	32 (30.2%)	52 (34.0%)	
Neutral attitude	54 (50.9%)	68 (44.4%)	0.58
Negative attitude	20 (18.9%)	33 (21.6%)	

n= number. Compraison was made using Chi-square test

Males and females differed significantly in their knowledge about forensic medicine (*P*=0.003), but the relation between their gender and attitude was statisticaly non significant (Table 5).There was no correlation between the total scores of participants' knowledge and their total attitude scores (r = 0.07; p = 0.206) (Table 6).

Table (6): Correlation between the total scores of participants' knowledge and their total attitude scores:

	Total attitude score	
	r	P value
Total knowledge score	**0.07**	**0.206**

r= Pearson correlation

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the knowledge and attitude of medical undergraduates in Egypt regarding the potential of forensic medicine as a career choice. The findings revealed that a significant proportion of the participant demonstrated a high to moderate level of knowledge in the field of forensic medicine. However, only a minority of the participants exhibited a positive attitude toward pursuing a career in forensic medicine. At the time of questionnaire distribution, forensic medicine was taught to undergraduate medical students at Menoufia University during their fourth year as an 8-week course. The curriculum consisted of theoretical lectures and a practical part about writing primary medicolegal reports for different injuries and death certificates. It also entailed projectile specimens, firearm wounds, and postmortem changes. Moreover, the clinical part included training on first aid maneuvers in emergency toxicology cases.

About 60.2% of the current sample relied on the faculty curriculum as their primary source of information on forensic medicine. This suggests that the college curriculum is comprehensive and covers a wide range of topics within the field of forensic medicine. The present findings are consistent with a study conducted on medical

students in various universities in Saudi Arabia, which also reported a good level of awareness of forensic medicine among the participants (Hamdi and Zaki, 2012). In contrast, some other studies found that more than half of the students surveyed had limited awareness of forensic medicine (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Al-Anazi et al., 2022).

Two-thirds of the students in the present study were unaware of the most common cases dealt with by forensic physicians. 22.01% mistakenly believed that rape cases were predominant, while 42.08% did not know the answer. This misconception may be influenced by TV shows and media where sexual assault cases are frequently dealt with. A cross-sectional survey among 4th year medical students in Dammam, Saudi Arabia by Madadin (2013) obtained similar findings, where the study revealed that 61% of the students answered the same question incorrectly, indicating a lack of awareness regarding the common cases encountered in forensic medicine.

About 42.08% of the students incorrectly believed that forensic toxicology, anthropology, and serology were the only subspecialties within forensic science. This misconception may be explained by the fact that these were the main branches covered by their college curriculum. Although the students had been exposed to topics such as ballistics and firearm injuries, plant poisoning, odontology, and forensic DNA analysis, they did not recognize them as distinct branches of forensic science.

In the present study, no significant correlation between the overall knowledge scores and the attitude scores of the participants was observed. The decision to select a career specialty can be a complex process for medical students, influenced by various factors. These factors may include prior experiences in medical school, financial considerations, gender differences, personal interests, job prospects, and work-life balance considerations (Madadin, 2013), and the main issues is the bylaws of university and number of vacancies available.

Most of the participants considered forensic medicine as a specialty is not a well-paid job and does not offer opportunities for working abroad. Moreover, most of them consider forensic medicine in Egypt is a limited specialty that doesn't enable private practice, without a significant difference between those who had a positive attitude and who had a negative attitude. These findings should be interpreted within the framework of the prevailing phenomenon observed in recent years, wherein a growing number of medical students and young physicians from Egypt are choosing to pursue employment opportunities outside of the country (Kabbash et al., 2021).

The current results were in accordance with a study by Alawad et al. (2015) in which a minority of the responders chose forensic medicine as a specialty. They reported that forensic medicine was among the three least branches to meet their personal interests, the feeling of being helpful to the community and job opportunities (Alawad et al., 2015).

In Egypt, choosing forensic medicine as a specialty offers career options such as working as a forensic medical examiner in the Forensic Medicine Authority or as a staff member in forensic medicine departments at medical faculties. Menoufia Faculty of Medicine is known for providing opportunities for "clinical forensic medicine and toxicology resident physicians." Another potential job opportunity is working as a clinical toxicologist in toxicology and poisoning centers.

Forensic medical examiners exclusively receive payment from the Ministry of Justice and are paid quite well in comparison to physicians in other disciplines

(Kharoshah et al., 2011). Payments for expert witnesses in court are based on the circumstances of each case (civil or criminal) and the length of the study period, particularly in conditions involving damage compensations in malpractice and accident cases and a panel of judges estimates payment in accordance with the ministerial rules and regulations (Forensic Medicine Authority, 1999). Staff members in faculties of medicine are paid their monthly government salary. New generations of physicians may consider these salaries insufficient, especially with the collapse of the current economic conditions in Egypt. In addition, the forensic medicine specialty does not allow the opening of private clinics like other specialties, which does not provide an opportunity to extra income besides the government salary.

To the extent of our knowledge, studies discussing forensic medicine as a career choice in Egypt are scanty, and the present study provided a realistic picture of students' attitudes and views regarding working in the field of forensic medicine. However, the current study has faced limitations. First, it was conducted at a single university. Second, the new shift toward the module system in Egyptian medical schools (5+2 system), which the current sample has not esxperienced, may affect the experience of teaching forensic medicine to new generations of medical students, and therefore, their attitude of forensic medicine as a career choice. Third, the response rate was less than expected, and this may affect the generalizability of the findings and introduce potential biases. Future research should aim to improve response rates to enhance the reliability and applicability of the results.

Conclusions

Forensic medicine was an interesting branch for medical students that they had good knowledge and a positive attitude toward it, reflecting the comprehensiveness of the college curriculum and its efficiency to cover large parts of forensic science, and its success in consolidating information among students. However, forensic medicine was not one of the preferred future career options for nearly half of medical students in our study.

We recommend improving the economic conditions, improving the work environment, and providing more job opportunities for forensic physicians. More awareness about the vital role played by forensic physicians in both healthcare and legal systems is needed to expand the students knowledge about forensic medicine and development of their interest in it a career choice.

Conflict of Interest:

The authors of this study have declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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معرفة وموقف طلاب الطب المصريين تجاه ممارسة مهنة الطب الشرعي

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يعد الطب الشرعي مجالاً حيويا في كل من مجال الرعاية الصحية والأنظمة القانونية. إن مدى معرفة الطلاب واهتمامهم باختيار الطب الشرعي كمهنة مستقبلية هو أملا غير واضح. ولذلك، فإن هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى تقييم المعرفة والمواقف الحالية لطلاب الطب وطلبة الامتياز تجاه احتمالية اختيار تخصص الطب الشرعي كتخصص مستقبلي.

تم إجراء دراسة مقطعية تجريبية، ذاتية الإدارة، مبنية على الاستبيان، في كلية الطب، جامعة المنوفية، مصر. خلال العام الدراسي ٢٠٢٢/٢٠٢٣، تم اختيار طلاب من السنتين الخامسة والسادسة وطلاب الامتياز بشكل عشوائي ودعوتهم لملء استبيان عبر الإنترنت، وتم استقبال ٢٥٩ إجابة صالحة.

معظم المستجيبين كانوا من الإناث (٥٩,١%) وفي السنة الخامسة (٣٥,٥%). أعرب ٩٣,٤% من الطلاب عن مستوى عالٍ إلى متوسط من المعرفة. وكان منهج الكلية هو المصدر الرئيسي للمعرفة لـ ٦٠,٢% منهم. أبدى ٨٤ طالبًا فقط (٣٢,٤٪) موقفًا إيجابيًا تجاه الطب الشرعي كتخصص. سيختار ٢٨,١٩% من الطلاب الطب الشرعي كأحد التخصصات التي سيتدربون عليها خلال سنة الامتياز، بينما يعتبره ٢٦,٣% خيارًا وظيفيًا محتملاً بعد التخرج. ولم يتم العثور على ارتباط بين مجموع درجات معرفة المشاركين ومجموع درجات مواقفهم. وكانت هناك نسبة جيدة من الطلاب لديهم معرفة جيدة بالطب الشرعي. ومع ذلك، لم يكن هذا هو الخيار الوظيفي المستقبلي المفضل لمعظمهم. هناك حاجة إلى بذل المزيد من الجهود لرفع مستوى الوعي حول الطب الشرعي كخيار وظيفي بين طلاب الطب في مصر.