

Desirable Character Strengths of Medical Doctors: Perception of Final Year Medical Students in Oman

Sabitha Panambur¹, Maria Mohammed Sulaiman Al Bandari², Chitrangi Johari²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Pharmacology, Oman Medical College, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman, ²Medical Intern, Oman Medical College, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the medical students' views on the character strengths a doctor should possess. A survey consisting of 24 character strengths listed under the Values in Action Classification was administered on 120 final year medical students of Oman Medical College, Oman. Students portrayed a promising image of doctor by remarkably valuing the 21 character strengths as important attributes of a doctor.

Key words: Character strengths, Medical practice, Medical students, Professional virtues

INTRODUCTION

The patient–doctor relationship is trust-driven, and it is the doctors' virtuous behavior that underpins this trust.¹ Virtues, within the context of medical practice, can be seen as “character orientations or dispositions possessed by effective physicians that enable them to provide optimal medical care to their patients.”² There are multiple virtues arising out of different traditions, and there is no consensus as to conclude which of these virtues are essential to the practice of medicine.² Professional organizations and individuals have described core attributes of a doctor that are necessary for good medical care.¹⁻⁵ Studies have tried to explore the views of medical students on the desirable qualities of doctors.^{6,7} We conducted a one-time survey on final year medical students to learn their opinion about the virtues that characterize a doctor. For this, we placed a set of 24 character strengths taken from the Values in Action (VIA) Classification⁸ before students and asked them how important they consider that a doctor should bear these qualities. The VIA

classification defines 24 character strengths that fall under six broad virtue categories: Wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. This framework covers cognitive strengths (wisdom), emotional strengths (courage), social and community strengths (humanity and justice), protective strengths (temperance), and spiritual strengths (transcendence).⁸

The participants of this survey comprised 120 medical students who had completed 2 years of clinical rotation in various specialties and were soon to be graduated from Oman Medical College, Oman. They rated the 24 character strengths on a 5-point Likert scale as 1 = not important at all, 2 = slightly important, 3 = moderately important, 4 = very important, and 5 = most important for a doctor to possess. The mean ratings were computed and presented in Figure 1. All the 120 students opined that a doctor should embody all the 24 character strengths. 21 character strengths scored mean ratings of more than four which indicates that majority of students perceived them as either very important or most important traits of a doctor. Both these facts suggest that our students highly valued the role of virtues in the practice of medicine. Honesty showed up with the highest mean rating (4.67) followed by teamwork (4.54), judgment (4.54), fairness (4.53), kindness (4.50), and love of learning (4.50) and these character strengths correspond with some of the core attributes of a good doctor that are described by professional bodies

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Corresponding Author: Sabitha Panambur, Department of Pharmacology, Oman Medical College, Sohar, Sultanate of Oman.
E-mail: sabitha@omc.edu.om

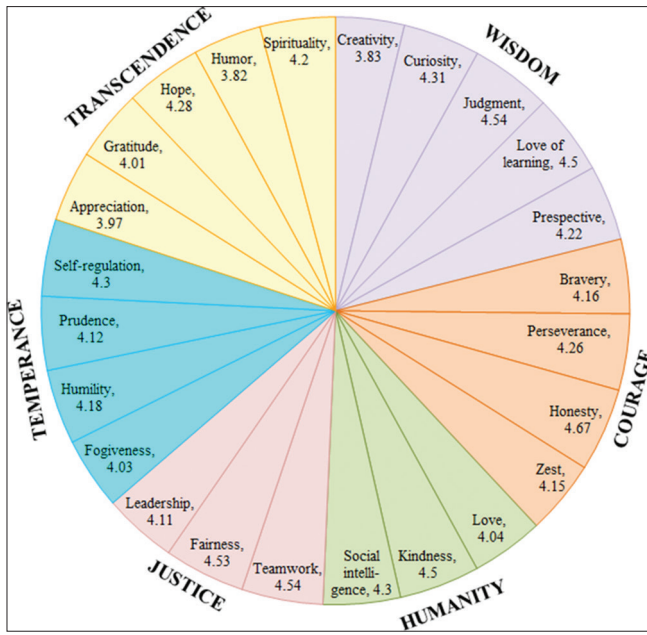


Figure 1: Mean ratings of 24 character strengths

and commentators^{1-5,9} and emphasized in the Health Care Ethics Course which these students studied in the 2nd year of medical training. In this study, students were also invited to list the character traits from the VIA classification that they have most commonly observed in their teachers during the patient encounter. 80% of the students responded to this request, and the same aforementioned six traits were reported more frequently. Medical educators advocate teaching virtues explicitly, and implicitly through role modeling by virtuous clinical teachers.¹² Findings of this study clearly points at the positive impact of medical training on the students' image of a doctor. However, there were many more character traits that the students had highly placed while typifying a doctor. It is believed that character formation of an individual takes place in the moral communities to which one belongs to, could it be family, society, or a nation as a whole.¹⁰ Majority (90%) of our students were Oman nationals and possibly having raised in rich moral community traditions, they would have already learnt to value the virtues which perhaps echoed in their attributes of a doctor. Alternatively, it can be argued

that the students are being “too idealistic” in their notion of a doctor because they have not yet faced the challenges of medical practice.

CONCLUSION

The positive viewpoints expressed by our students on the constructs of an effective doctor may reflect their own vision of what sorts of practitioners they aspire to become in future. The study findings may prompt the teachers to consider incorporating the virtues emphasized by the students in the teaching curriculum. The study may also kindle awareness about professional virtues among those students who had not given much attention to this subject so far.

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