Does clerkship religious affiliation influence family planning training for medical students?

Rachel N Feltman1,*, Steven R Lewis2, Nathan E Thompson3

1NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine
2Department of Clinical Medicine, NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine
3Department of Anatomy, NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine

Introduction

Despite contraception and abortion being fundamental aspects of family planning care, education and training regarding these topics are poorly incorporated or absent in undergraduate medical education (Guash, et al., 2020). Restrictions placed on family planning care at faith-based hospitals may serve as an additional barrier to comprehensive medical student training during their Ob/Gyn clerkship (e.g., Bringley et al., 2022). This study sought to determine: 1) the degree to which contraception and abortion topics are covered during the core Ob/Gyn clerkship and 2) if family planning training during the Ob/Gyn clerkship differs between faith-based and non-faith-based sites.

Methods

We conducted a survey of NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine (NYIT COM) students in the 2023 and 2024 classes at both the Old Westbury, NY and Jonesboro, AR sites. Surveys inquired about self-perceived competency in contraceptive and abortion counseling confidence, ability, and knowledge following the 3rd year core Ob/Gyn clerkship, in addition to evaluating the experiences and observations during the clerkship and a brief objective knowledge assessment. Students also reported their clerkship site and religious affiliation of the site. Linear models and Fisher’s exact tests were used to evaluate differences among religious, and secular, affiliations of the clerkship sites.

Results

In total, 102 students fully completed the survey including their Ob/Gyn clerkship site and the site’s religious affiliation. The breakdown of religious affiliations of the clerkship sites includes: 54 non-faith-based, 26 Catholic, 15 Jewish, and 7 Protestant sites (see Fig. 1).

Across all clerkship sites more students observed patient care related to contraception compared to abortion (Fig. 2). Among site religious affiliations, students at non-faith-based sites reported the highest level of observations for 5 of the 8 family planning care topics presented. Students at Catholic sites reported the lowest level of observations for 6 of the 8 statements.

When looking at self-perceived competency following the clerkship, students at secular sites felt significantly more competent in contraceptive counseling confidence, ability, and knowledge compared to Catholic sites (Fig. 3). Overall competency in abortion related topics was low, regardless of clerkship site affiliation.

Responses to the Prompt: During my OB/GYN clerkship, I observed:

- Patient counseling about methods of contraception (including the associated risks, benefits, and patient safety implications).
- Prescription of appropriate contraception to patient(s).
- Non-directive patient counseling about pregnancy termination options.
- Ultrasound (of a patient planning an abortion).
- Discussion and prescription of medications for a non-surgical abortion.
- Surgical abortion procedure.
- Examination of products of conception.
- Follow up office visit for someone who recently had an abortion.

Responses to the Prompt: After the clerkship...

- I feel more confident with being able to counsel a patient regarding the benefits, risks, and appropriate use of different contraception methods.
- I could adequately counsel a patient about different methods of contraception, including emergency contraception.
- I am knowledgeable enough to discuss methods of contraception with patients.
- I feel more confident with being able to counsel a patient about what to expect with an abortion.
- I could adequately counsel a patient about what to expect from an abortion.
- I am knowledgeable enough to discuss abortion with patients.
- I could adequately explain all options to a patient who has an unintended pregnancy.

Fig. 3: Results of self-assessed student competency in contraceptive and abortion counseling. All questions began with a prompt regarding their Ob/Gyn clerkship. “After the clerkship...” All results are standardized by percentage of student responses within a religious affiliation category. Bars and asterisks represent a significant difference between religious affiliation of the clerkship site at either the P<0.05 or P<0.01 level.

Conclusions

Clerkship training at faith-based sites, specifically Catholic sites, results in poorer Ob/Gyn training outcomes, particularly in contraceptive care. Training outcomes in abortion care were poor at all clerkship sites.