

ATTITUDES TOWARDS AND KNOWLEDGE OF HIV AND PLWHA AMONGST AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL STUDENTS

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Background:

Long-term health outcomes for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) are affected by the quality and understanding of care providers. Biases, misinformation and misunderstandings regarding HIV and PLWHA can significantly impact care. For doctors, medical school is a critical period when understanding and attitudes are formed.

There are currently no local data profiling attitudes of medical students towards PLWHA. This descriptive study gauged medical students' opinions regarding PLWHA and their understanding of HIV/AIDS.

Methods:

Using a REDCap-based self-administered survey disseminated to undergraduate and postgraduate Monash University medical students, we assessed knowledge of HIV and attitudes towards PLWHA. The survey is based on existing international studies of medical students and the Provider Perception Inventory of healthcare providers. The survey remained open for 7 weeks and closed in March 2024. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics.

Results:

Of the 136 respondents, most were undergraduates (116/136, 85.3%) with a median age of 21 years (range 17-31 years). Forty-eight (35.3%) were preclinical and eighty-eight (64.7%) were clinical students. Most (42/48, 87.5%) preclinical and (65/88, 67.0%) clinical year students had inaccurate HIV/AIDS knowledge. Only 6.8% (6/88) clinical students felt confident counselling PLWHA on management. There were 10 (7.4%) students that expressed negative bias towards PLWHA in personal and professional settings. Most (102/136, 75%) had never met a PLWHA. Forty-one percent (25/48, 52% of preclinical, 31/88, 35% of clinical) felt they had insufficient HIV/AIDS education and 88% (120/136) felt that further education would be beneficial.

Conclusions:

Clinical knowledge of HIV/AIDS improved as students progressed through medical school. However, most had inaccurate knowledge regarding HIV transmission and lacked confidence in counselling PLWHA regarding diagnosis, community support, and management. Bias against PLWHA was uncommon compared to similar international studies. Given these results, we must identify and address gaps in medical education to ensure PLWHA have ongoing access to quality care.

Declarations of Interest:

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