

## PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND ITS IMPROTANCE IN EDUCATION

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### **Abstract:-**

**Background:** Today's fast-changing world and developments in health care system have indirect or direct effects on communication ethics. More and more unethical situations are faced by health care workers in their professional work. Thus, it is important to address the ethical aspects more seriously already in the learning environment.

**Objective:** To describe the students' opinions on learning professional ethics.

**Methods:** The methodology combines theoretical and empirical parts, semistructured interviews conducted with 47 students were analysed.

**Results:** All respondents emphasized the importance of learning professional ethics to cope with unethical situations in practice. Students prefer integration of ethics across speciality courses.

**Conclusions:** Ethical aspects should be more integrated into speciality studies and ethics simulations should be used as teaching methods.

**Keywords:-** professional ethics, medical ethics, nursing ethics, communication and ethics.

## INTRODUCTION

Many professions have their own ethical standards, which generally require to do your tasks impeccably, justify the duties appointed to you and provide the profession with clearer framework and certain prestige. (Anderson: 392). Professional ethics are the branch of the practical ethics. When a part of these branches consider some wider fields as a whole (for example medical ethics), then professional ethics can be limited to ethics of a certain profession (for example medical ethics, nursing ethics). ([https://www.eetika.ee/et/moraal/kutse\\_eetika](https://www.eetika.ee/et/moraal/kutse_eetika)). In practical life, guides to professional ethics help us in work situations, because they enhance our quality of work. (Follestad 2012: 86).

Clearly there is a need in many areas of activity to have an agreed ethic – an agreed code of behaviour. However, it is of special importance in those professions that have the closest, often confidential relationship with other people, such as medicine, nursing, the law and education. The aim of these "professional ethics" is to protect the patient, client or child as well as regulating the relationship between the professionals themselves. (Johnson&Johnson 2007: 7).

Already from ancient times to the 19th century, ethics have belonged to medical training. In the 19th century, medical training was shortened at the expense of teaching humanities, but after the Second World War, especially in the end of the 20th century, ethics were being paid more attention to. (Engelhardt 2002: 310).

According to Hulkower, the Hippocrates Oath was composed in the fourth Century B.C.E. (Hulkower 2016: 41). Hippocrates formulated the first standards and ethical rules to be followed in medical profession, which are still valid today. (Orfanos 2007: 159). Among professor Herbert Normann's manuscripts of the 1930s preserved in the Tartu University Library, are lecture notes on medical ethics, thus it is sure that the lectures were delivered to medical students. (Soosaar 2016: 69).

The importance of an ethical basis for medical practice has been emphasized in recent years. Several groups and countries have called for a broadly embraced, basic curriculum in ethics for students in the medical profession. (Gabel 2011: 421) In relation to medical ethics, a question of training in the field arises. Concepts of how to teach or learn ethics within medical studies, possibilities and limits of doing this, are various and arguable. The understanding of ethics, what needs to be taught, plays a key role in these discussions. (Engelhardt 2002: 310).

It cannot be denied that rapid developments in both the field itself and in educational needs and opportunities pose challenges to teaching medical ethics, but, after all, it is essential that students believe in the importance of ethical problems complementary to medicine, acquire the main methods in order to recognise them and learn to take into account all ethical aspects in making medical decisions. (Soosaar 2016: 70).

Historically, ethics are considered to be a systematic doctrine of moral choices. Ethics give us an answer to a question what value has honesty, money, work or progress. (Merisalu 2005: 45). In practical everyday life, guidelines of professional ethics help us in work situation because they improve the quality of our work. (Follestad 2012: 86)

## Background and Importance of the Research

Topic is actual as the rapid development of society and health care system has both, indirect and direct effect on communication ethics. Health care workers are more and more faced with unethical situations in their professional work lives as faced with modern globalization and cultural integration. When designing the current research in the field of professional ethics in educational settings, an international project „Increasing Ethical Competence in Midwifery Education and Practice“ (INEC), which main goal is to create solid student competences deriving from the professional ethics was investigated and consulted to gain in-depth understanding of the topics which concern professional ethics in learning and working environment. In the project, special attention is paid to solving ethical problems. (INEC 2016).

According to Prosser et al (2012) ethics cannot be taught using traditional methods, i.e. lecturing. It must be based in creative thinking. (Prosser et al 2012: 1). Professional ethic-related awareness is important as it influences health, relationships and work results of all people involved. The research was started with an aim to investigate and describe communication problems related to professional ethics of the learners in Tallinn Health Care College in theoretical learning situations and during practical training and the usage and awareness of existing support systems when solving ethical problems. Current article focuses on one of the categories investigated in the research, which is students opinions on learning professional ethics.

## Research Method

Research tasks were to (1) describe the students' opinions on learning professional ethics; (2) to describe the problems related to professional ethics in theoretical and practical training environment; (3) to describe and analyse the students awareness on professional ethics and the management of unethical problems in theoretical and practical training environment; (4) to map the awareness and usage of existing support system.

The methodology combines theoretical and empirical parts, semistructured interviews conducted with 47 first or second year students were analysed. The sample of the research is focus groups consisting of students. Student groups (all together 47 students) from the following curricula in Tallinn Health Care College voluntarily participated in the research: Health Promotion Specialist, Nurse, Midwife, Dental Technician, Assistant Pharmacist, Occupational Therapist and Optometrist. The sample was created using a snowball method where an informant provides the contact of the next participant. Semi-structured focus group interviews were used, which enable to collect information from in-depth answers as well as ask for further specifications. Focus group was lead by a moderator whose task was to keep the discussion within the specified topic and create an environment free of social pressure. (Krueger, 2009). The duration of an interview varie from 1,5-2 hours, there were 5-7 participants in one focus group and the working language was Estonian.

The main structure and questions of the interview were compiled before starting the actual session, most of which were open questions. During the interview the moderators were able to ask for more details or specifications and the

respondents were guided by the directions of the questions and occasionally the given information was rediscussed in the interests of accuracy and validity. (Ellis et al 2010: 29).

The research process consisted of collecting scientific, evidence based information, conducting interviews, transcribing the information retrieved from the interviews, coding and categorization, analysis. Thematic content analysis and mainly horizontal analysis is used to analyze the respondents' answers. As it often occurred, the answers of the respondents within the interview were not full sentences but sometimes emotional short exclamations adding to the previous answer of the group member, the researchers interpretation of the answer includes the logical thought sequel. (Patton, 2002).

Current article only focuses on the first research task, which was to describe the students' opinions on learning professional ethics. Examples from the interviews are brought out which is followed by the discussion of the acquired knowledge.

### **Students Opinions on Learning Professional Ethic**

The following section will focus on presenting information on the first research task, which was to investigate and describe the students' opinions on learning professional ethics. Three questions were asked to gain insight into the topic: What is the meaning of professional ethics? If and why is it necessary to teach professional ethics? Whether and how are ethical aspects treated in your professional studies? Example answers to the three questions are presented by each curriculum group in random order.

Typical answers to the question "What is the meaning of professional ethics?":

#### **Dental technology students:**

- Mutual respect
- Responsibility at work
- Information availability
- Communication? People are different...
- It is difficult to say...

#### **Optometry students:**

- Some rules or norms
- Behaviour in accordance to your speciality
- A specialist's rights
- Your rights maybe?

#### **Nursing students:**

- Conscience and behaviour
- Moral cognizance
- Considering opinions of others
- Patient-centred attitude
- Environment has the influence on the professional ethics
- Despite any patient's behaviour, you have to remain calm and patient-centred attitude.

#### **Midwifery students:**

- Discrimination based on race, skin colour, ethnicity and national origin is not allowed
- Ethics of teamwork: collaboration between midwives and doctors
- Humanity
- It is important to follow professional ethics in your private life too, but in some cases, professional and personal ethics may cause a moral conflict
- To my mind, ethics is rather behaviour than rules...

#### **Occupational therapy students:**

- It is a set of rules to be followed in your work
- To provide good occupational therapy

#### **Health promotion specialist students:**

- All rules are not found in the code of ethics, unwritten rules of behaviour are considered to be acceptable in a society.
- We have professional ethics of a specialist of health promotion and certain rules...

#### **Assistant pharmacist students:**

- Professional ethical standards
- One branch of ethics focusing on a certain profession
- Ethics of behaviour according to your profession

A set of rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Optometrists</li> <li>•Nurses</li> <li>•Occupational therapists</li> <li>•Health promotion specialists</li> <li>•Dental technicians</li> <li>•Midwives</li> </ul>
Patient-centered attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Nurses</li> <li>•Occupational therapists</li> </ul>
Mutual respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Midwives</li> <li>•Dental technicians</li> </ul>
Unwritten rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Midwives</li> <li>•Health promotion specialists</li> </ul>
Specialist's rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Optometrists</li> </ul>
Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Dental technicians</li> </ul>
Humanity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Midwives</li> </ul>
Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Optometrists</li> <li>•Nurses</li> <li>•Assistant pharmacists</li> </ul>
Discrimination is not allowed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Midwives</li> </ul>

**Figure 1. Understanding of professional ethics by groups**

Answering the question "What is the meaning of professional ethics?", an expression "set of rules" was mentioned by students from all speciality groups. Nursing and occupational therapy students emphasized patient-centred attitude, midwifery and dental technology students mentioned mutual respect to be important in professional ethics, and unwritten rules in professional ethics were highlighted by midwifery and health promotion specialist students. "specialist's rights" was noted by optometry students, "responsibility" by dental technology students and midwifery students opinion was that "discrimination is not allowed".

Some example answers to the question "If and why is it necessary to teach professional ethics?" were:

**Dental technology students:**

- It starts at home, but you need some more knowledge about ethics

**Optometry students:**

- You have to know how to behave with your clients, colleagues from other stores or companies
- You have to know how to solve conflicts

**Nursing students:**

- Yes, it is very useful
- Ethics comes from home
- All ethical aspects are not equally understandable, that is why we need more knowledge about ethics

**Midwifery students:**

- We passed the topic on the 1st year, but it should be continued and integrated into other subjects
- The Code of Ethics for Midwives has been discussed on the 1st course. I think that it is very useful
- There are situations, that need to be role-played in order to make right decisions-
- More discussions on ethics are needed
- It is impossible to put ethics straight, ethics should embed in you

**Occupational therapy students:**

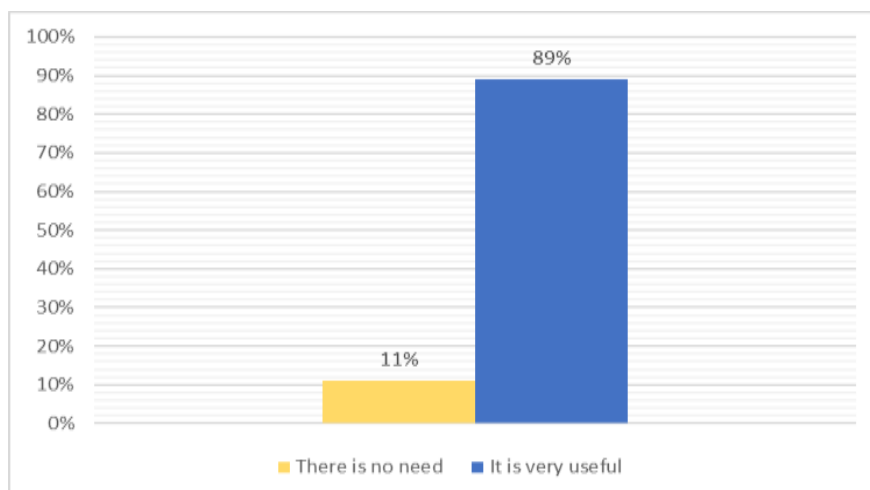
- Yes, it is
- Teaching professional ethics requires high-level knowledge to provide interest in this
- There is a need for harmonizing understanding ethical aspects
- It is not enough to go through ethics on the 1st course only

**Health promotion specialist students:**

- More lessons on ethics are needed
- There are certain ethical standards, but some people have not heard about them
- You have to know that people have different norms and limits

**Assistant pharmacist students:**

- It is very useful
- There is minimal need for
- You have acquired ethics already at home, but some rules have to be gone over in the university too



**Figure 2. Need for learning professional ethics**

Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that most students in each speciality group (42 respondents) find learning ethics to be very useful, because people have different understandings about professional ethics and they have to be harmonized. 9 of these 42 respondents emphasized the need for integrating ethics into other subjects. 5 students found that learning ethics is not needed because one's ethics actually starts from home. According to the students' more detailed comments, learning ethics provides them with knowledge that is useful for ethical behaving with their clients and solving conflicts. One student emphasized that teaching professional ethics requires high-level knowledge and skills from the lecturer.

Answers to the question "Whether and how are ethical aspects treated in your professional studies?" were:

**Dental technology students:**

- We discussed ethical aspects in Philosophy
- In all subjects
- Ethical theories passed at the college cannot be applied in practice. You may face different attitudes toward work ethics in practical work.
- Delivering a lecture with slides only is not effective

**Optometry students:**

- We discussed ethical aspects in Psychology of Communication (ethical client service)
- In the subject Eye Examination (following ethical norms)
- In the subject Client Service

**Nursing students:**

- In Anatomy, Foundations of Nursing, Nursing Procedures, Patient Education.
- Briefly in each lecture.
- More detailed knowledge is needed on problem-solving techniques for stress management, how to put ethics into practice
- Role-plays on certain situations are useful

**Midwifery students:**

- In the subject „Risk Pregnancy“ (lecturer talked about her experiences and emphasized ethical aspects in them).
- We have had many role-plays to be prepared for different situations and counselling processes when also midwifery ethical dilemmas have been discussed.
- Attention to professional appearance has been paid (ethical appearance at work: open hair, make-up, long and coloured nail polish are not acceptable in health care)
- Cannot be applied in practice

**Occupational therapy students:**

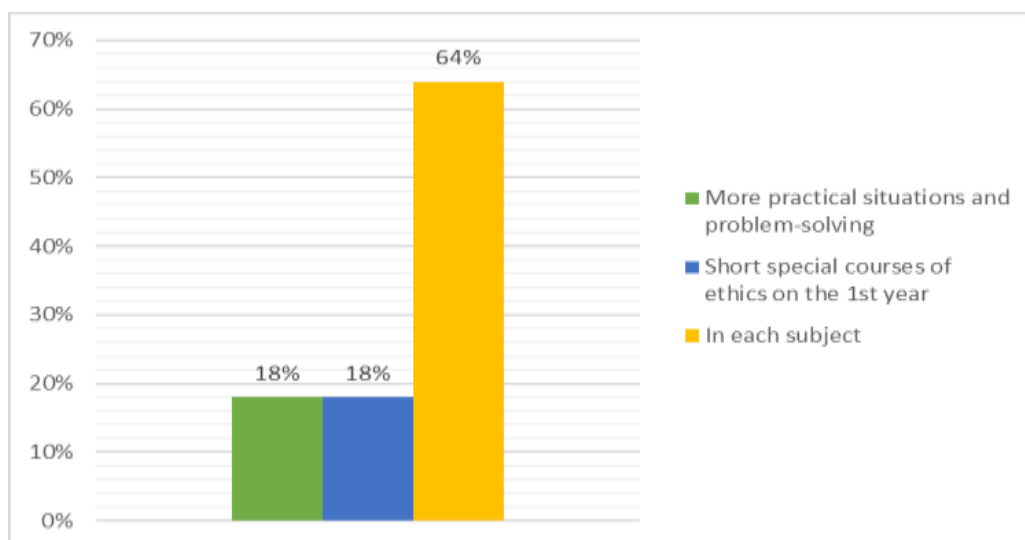
- All our lecturers have emphasized client-centredness,
- confidentiality,
- Client's wishes have to be accepted, not criticized.

**Health promotion specialist students:**

- In subject Philosophy (moral and ethics)
- Within the subject Public Health
- Ethical aspects have been discussed in each subject

**Assistant pharmacist students:**

- In the subject Pharmacotherapy some ethical aspects have been paid attention to
- Ethical counselling of clients in pharmacy has been discussed
- Cannot be implemented into practice



**Figure 3. Discussing ethical aspects in professional education**

Based on the students' answers, ethical aspects have been discussed in each subject in each speciality group whereas the number of hours spent on ethical aspects varies. Two speciality groups (students of midwifery and occupational therapy) had short special courses of ethics on the 1st year. Two speciality groups (dental technician students and nursing students) emphasized the need for providing more practical situations and problem-solving skills in the learning environment relating to ethics.

**Discussion**

Medical ethics can be divided into different sub-areas in a variety of ways. It is understandable that this division comes from different professions within medicine, according to which we can define ethics for doctors, for midwives, for nurses and for other health care specialists. Medical ethics are the most extensive ethics having a long tradition, but the other health care professions have also moved towards creating independent professional ethics since the second half of the 20th century. (Soosaar, 2016). Thus, ethics for other health care specialists are based on traditional medical ethics. That is why the respondents' answers reflect common ethical principles in medicine and the analysis is also based on them.

According to Soosaar, each health care field has a common part of ethical principles consisting of basic values of health care and medical activities, and the relationship between a health care specialist and a patient. (Soosaar, 2016).

Based on the Codes of Ethics for each profession being trained in the Tallinn Health Care College, the following common fundamental ethical principles were taken into account: to promote and support human health; to provide care to a patient/client with respect to human rights and well-being within his/her competencies; to provide care regardless race, religion, nationality, social or political status of a patient/client; to demonstrate professional values as respectfulness, responsiveness, trustworthiness and integrity; confidentiality. In authors' opinion, it is understandable that the students were not able to bring out all ethical principles written in the Codes of Ethics. They express themselves spontaneously and emphasized these aspects that seemed to be important to them at this moment.

Answering the question "What is the meaning of professional ethics?", a set of rules was revealed by students of all speciality groups. Assistant pharmacy students answer was the most specific: they defined professional ethics as one branch of ethics focusing on a certain profession.

After taking into account the above highlighted fundamental ethical principles, more detailed explanation was expected. Only occupational therapy students emphasized the importance of providing care/service to a patient/client, but patient-centred attitude was mentioned by both, nursing and occupational therapy students. Midwifery students referred to human rights (discrimination based on race, skin colour, ethnicity and national origin is not allowed). Inherent to professional values were answers of dental technology students (they highlighted responsibility and mutual respect), and midwifery students who stated the importance of mutual respect and humanity. Three speciality groups (midwifery, optometry, health promotion specialist students) valued professional, ethical behaviour. Occupational therapy students referred to competencies emphasizing the importance of providing good occupational therapy.

According to Follestad (2012), health care providers are obliged to behave in accordance with the written ethical principles in health care. (Follestad 2012: 73). Midwifery and health promotion specialist students considered that unwritten rules were also important pointing to personal morality.

All common ethical principles based on the Codes of Ethics for health care specialists were generally mentioned and different aspects were valued per group. The importance of confidentiality was not mentioned by any of the groups.

With the second question „Is it necessary to teach professional ethics?“, the authors aimed to investigate how important it is to provide the students in the Tallinn Health Care College with courses on ethics. According to Gabel (2011), the importance of an ethical basis for medical practice has been emphasized in recent years. (Gabel 2011: 421). Health care specialists have close contact with their patients/clients, thus in addition to their competencies they have to know the rules of ethical behaviour and communication as well. For Johnson&Johnson (2007), medical ethics are the obligations of a moral nature that govern the practice of medicine. (Johnson&Johnson, 2007).

42 respondents (89%) were on a viewpoint that learning professional ethics is very useful because people have different understandings about professional ethics and the understandings have to be harmonized. According to Follestad (2012) „.../ however, we experience in our private and professional life situations when we are not sure how to behave. Our actions may have repercussions for us and others. Ethics help us to make choices and to do the right thing in difficult situation.“ (Follestad 2012: 73). Optometry students believed that one had to know how to behave with clients, colleagues from other stores or companies and how to solve conflicts. Ethical communication skills play important role in the health care field because „a care provider has to be a good listener, to set out in situation, be understanding and really cared. The aim of a professional discussion is to arrive at a common understanding to perform certain duties.“ (Evans 2008: 32). Most nursing students also emphasized a need for learning professional ethics because all ethical aspects are not understandable and need further explanations and discussion.

9 students out of the 42 respondents (21,4%) consider learning ethics to be useful and emphasized a need for integrating ethics into other subjects. According to Engelhardt (2002), medical ethics should not be taught based on philosophical principles only, the closest connection to medicine is a decisive factor. (Engelhardt 2002: 320). According to students' more detailed comments, learning ethics provides them with knowledge that is useful for ethical behaving with their clients and solving conflicts.

In contrast to the prevalent opinions, 5 (10,6%) respondents found that learning ethics is not needed because one's ethics comes from home. One occupational therapy student emphasized that teaching professional ethics required high-level knowledge to provide interest in this and a midwifery students opinion was that it is impossible to convey in a straightforward way, it must be an integral part of oneself. According to Soosaar (2016) and Keis (2012), medical ethics has fundamentally changed within a short period of time in the second half of the 20th century, thus medical ethics today needs more varied educational techniques and continuous improvement of teaching content and form. (Soosaar 2016: 68; Keis 2012: 631).

The authors agree, that students' perception of the value of learning professional ethics is mostly clear. According to Engelhardt (2002), it should be in particular ascertained, on what this teaching and learning are based and as it is, it depends on the level of ethics – conscience, morality, duties, reason – the answer can be different. (Engelhardt 2002: 320).

Answers to the 3rd question „Whether and how are ethical aspects discussed in your studies?“ were expected to provide the researchers with information concerning the scope of ethical issues dealt within the studies in the Tallinn Health Care College. According to Soosaar (2016), today, medical and biomedical ethics courses take place for pharmacy, physiotherapy, and public health students in the Tartu University, for students in Tartu and Tallinn Health Care Colleges, and also for students whose profession is related to medicine in Tallinn Technical University. (Soosaar 2016: 69). The statement, which relates to the Tallinn Health Care College, was confirmed by all students participating in the interviews: all 47 respondents answered that they had discussed ethical aspects within different subjects. Based on the answers of midwifery and occupational therapy students, they have had a specific course on professional ethics during the 1st year, however, occupational therapy students underlined the importance of discussing ethical issues on the 3rd and 4th year again because they would have some practical experience by this time. Health promotion specialist students and dental technology students argued that ethical aspects had been discussed in each subject. There were subjects mentioned by the respondents specifically: Philosophy (by dental technology and health promotion specialist students), Psychology of Communication, Eye Examination and Client Service (by optometry students), Anatomy, Basics of Nursing, Nursing Activities and Patient Education (by nursing students),

Risk Pregnancy (by midwifery students), Public Health (by health promotion specialist students), Pharmacotherapy (by assistant pharmacy students). Assistant pharmacy students also mentioned that ethical counselling of clients in pharmacy had been discussed. For some students (dental technology, assistant pharmacist and midwifery students), ethical theories passed at the college cannot be implemented into practice because one may face different attitudes toward work ethics when doing practical work. In the light of these opinions, the students had some negative experience during their practical placement. The authors opinion is that students do acquire theoretical knowledge of professional ethics but sometimes it cannot be implemented into practice. Responsiveness to particularities of the practice context must be paired with an understanding and appreciation of general moral concepts and values. (Martin and Ruitenberg 2016: 3). Perhaps the solution worthy of discussion would be introducing ethical topics into practical training seminars the students of all specialities have after every practical training and the results of which included in the internship reports.

According to Engelhardt (2002), it is important for students to follow the example of practicing doctors and nursing staff in everyday clinical work, to observe patients, together with personal experience acquired within studies in university. (Engelhardt 2002: 320). However, in the workplace, they may face people whose actions are questionable and situations



when they do not know how to behave. Students who do not know what to do in an uncomfortable situation often adopt a policy of silence. This can happen because they feel unsure about the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, or, when learning practical procedures, are unsure how much they are allowed to do. (Johnson&Johnson 2007: 182). Based on the respondents` opinions, the authors agree with the nursing students who emphasized the importance of acquiring problem-solving and stress management techniques and the need for role-plays on certain situations. Midwifery students, however, claimed to have had many role-plays to be prepared for different situations and counselling processes. Thus, they found themselves to be better prepared for coping with difficulties in practical working environment than students of other professions. Not only ethical behaviour but also appropriate workplace appearance was discussed by midwifery students.

According to the interviews, the authors can conclude that most students are interested in learning professional ethics, but the approach to the topic should be attracting, „not shown with slides only“ as one respondent pointed to. According to Cribb&Duncan, ethical principles „obviously need to be actively interpreted and applied case by case.“ (Cribb&Duncan 2006:136).

The necessity of a specific course of professional ethics was not mentioned by any of the respondents, although midwifery and occupational therapy students claimed to having passed it on the 1st year. According to Soosaar (2016), multi-level teaching of medical ethics has been widely supported. More theoretical topics are passed in the early years and more practical approach is followed in the second half of the studies. (Soosaar 2016: 69). Based on the students` opinions, they need more problem-solving skills and practical situations to be discussed. By Soosaar (2016), problem-based learning is an alternative for systematic transmission of the knowledge. (Soosaar 2016: 70). According to Keis (2012), lecturer`s own experiences and articles published in media can be used for effective discussion on ethical problems with students (Keis: 2012: 630) and according to Soosaar, more and more different methods of e-learning and digital media are used to obtain necessary information. (Soosaar 2016: 70). The authors find that these teaching arrangements of professional ethics are more effective than only delivering classical lectures.

Further research will be conducted on the rest of the categories concluded from the interviews which will add to the general understanding of how students perceive professional ethics and which are the ways of managing unethical situations, if faced with one. According to the authors the results of the research encourage lecturers to tackle ethical problems during all of their classes and not to leave the sensitive matters to be discussed only during the ethics lectures.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the respondents answers reveal that students in the Tallinn Health Care College value learning professional ethics within their studies, although a few of the respondents reported ethical behaviour to be shaped by one`s childhood and domestic environment. In the light of the students` opinions, professional ethics were described as a set of rules by all of the respondents from all curricula. All common ethical principles based on the Codes of Ethics for health care specialists were brought out generally and different aspects were valued per curriculum group. The importance of confidentiality was not mentioned by any curriculum groups.

Most students in each speciality group (42 respondents) find learning ethics to be very useful, because people have different understandings about professional ethics and they have to be harmonized. There were also comments that learning ethics provides them with knowledge that is useful for ethical behaving with their clients and solving conflicts. Ethical problems have been discussed in each subject in each speciality group. Two speciality groups (midwifery and occupational therapy students) had short special courses of ethics on the 1st year. Two speciality groups (dental technology and nursing students) highlighted the need for providing more practical situations and problem-solving skills relating to ethics.

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