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Student experiences with abortion training: a qualitative study

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Project abstract

The Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics include abortion education as a core objective for medical students. Medical schools often use brief clinical exposure to abortion to meet this objective. For many students, this encounter serves as their only opportunity to observe this common but potentially controversial procedure. No study has asked students to reflect on the experience of witnessing abortion during their training.

In our 2015 pilot study, we asked 78 medical students in New York City (NYC) to respond to a questionnaire after observing an abortion. Qualitative analysis of their responses indicates that they grapple with the experience: they demonstrate both empathy for, and judgment of, the patient undergoing the procedure. They struggle with their lack or excess of emotion during and after the procedure, and with the absence of a forum for discussion afterward. This study was limited by the closed-ended nature of questionnaires and may not be generalizable to students outside of NYC.

We propose to conduct semi-structured interviews with medical students after they observe an abortion. We will recruit from two geographically similar study sites (large urban medical centers in the Midwest) but with politically dissimilar climates around abortion (The Ohio State University and The University of Chicago). Our study will utilize a phenomenological design to explore student experiences observing abortion.

We anticipate using our findings to build recommendations for evidence-based abortion observation curricula tailored to student needs and inclusive of varying perspectives. We will disseminate our teaching recommendations to educators.

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