LEARNING PROFESSIONAL ETHICAL PRACTICE: THE SPEECH PATHOLOGY EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

An ethics curriculum is an integral part of most health profession courses. This thesis will explore using a qualitative approach to investigate the learning and application of professional ethical practice by Flinders University speech pathology students. This work will identify factors that may influence students’ readiness to learn about ethics. The knowledge, skills and attitudes that underpin professional ethical practice which speech pathology students were able to demonstrate at the conclusion of their entry level course will be illustrated. Also described will be the factors, identified by students and academics and field educators, which may influence student learning of this complex area of practice.

To explore this topic, the results of “The Defining Issues Test” (Rest, 1979b) of moral judgement development, independent and scaffolded case studies, as well as group and individual interviews with students, and individual interviews with academic and field educators have been used.

Results from this study suggest that a significant number of the undergraduate speech pathology students involved in this study found learning and applying ethical principles difficult, as their ability to reason morally remained conventional and rule bound. At the point of graduation, the students applied clinical and ethical reasoning skills, whilst emerging, were not yet well developed. The ability of students to demonstrate the integration of ethical theory and practice appeared limited. This lack of integration may be influenced by the fact that few field educators could report being exposed to formal ethical theories and ethical reasoning approaches during their own undergraduate education. Some of the more generic ethical practice skills reported by academics as being embedded throughout the speech pathology course,
such as communication, team work and the seeking of professional support, were more clearly demonstrated by students.

Results of this study suggest that exiting students and newly graduated speech pathologists require ongoing support in the area of professional ethical practice. More explicit embedding of the theoretical underpinnings of the ethics knowledge base throughout the curriculum may be required. To be able to support the integration of professional ethical practice in students and new graduates, speech pathologists currently practising in the field who did not receive formal ethics education during their own degree or since, may require ongoing professional development in the formal knowledge base pertaining to professional ethical practice.
DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

HELEN SMITH
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