

4 Ethical and legal responsibilities of medical students

There are ethical and legal considerations even for students planning to enrol in medical school. After enrolment, from the point of first contact with patients—in year 1 in many medical courses—many of the ethical and legal responsibilities of doctors also apply to medical students. Thus, most of this book is relevant to medical students, and this relevance increases progressively as clinical training and patient contact increases. The curricula of all Australian medical schools provide information about these ethical and legal responsibilities and the schools aim to develop appropriate attitudes in students [1]. Consistent with these responsibilities, all medical students must be registered with the Medical Board of Australia. Some medical schools have adopted the practice of their students taking an oath of ethical commitment at graduation [2]. There is evidence that irresponsible behaviour and student misconduct at medical school, such as cheating and plagiarism, can strongly predict subsequent unprofessional conduct leading to disciplinary action by medical boards against practising doctors [3,4]. This evidence adds emphasis to the need for early education about expected professional standards and strong modelling of these by clinical teachers. Stressful ethical issues particular to the life of medical students are also discussed in this chapter, together with the code of ethics developed by the Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) [5], and issues around medical student health. Career choices in medicine are discussed in Chapter 18.

4.1 Considerations before enrolment

Australian medical courses leading to the degree of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MB BS), or its equivalent, are designed to prepare graduates with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for the provisional registration year (also known as the intern year or postgraduate year 1). Students who are contemplating a career in medicine need to be aware of the academic criteria for admission into the course and consider the following issues:

- a medical course is very demanding, and students need to be confident that they have the motivation, dedication, and financial and emotional support to complete it [6]

- the practice of medicine is essentially about helping people and requires a positive, non-judgemental attitude to other members of society, a desire to serve, good communication and interpersonal skills, and a sensible balance of altruism and self-respect
- to be a medical student and a doctor implies an informed willingness to accept the direct risks entailed, most notably the risks of contracting fatal infectious diseases from patients [7,8]
- medical students also need to be able to cope with the emotional and psychological impact of confronting serious illness and death
- acceptance into medical school may require compliance with immunisation schedules and consultation with an infectious diseases physician to arrange hepatitis B immunisation and to discuss testing for HIV, hepatitis C and tuberculosis
- on completion of the medical degree, provisional registration by the Medical Board of Australia may be denied for the following reasons
 - not being of good character
 - having been convicted of serious crime
 - being ill or impaired in a manner that may put the community at risk
 - being alcohol or drug dependent
 - having a physical or mental illness or impairment that significantly impairs the ability of the applicant to practise medicine.

Before being provisionally registered, the new medical graduate may be required to sign a statutory declaration attesting to the absence of any of the above factors. Having an illness or impairment includes the carriage of asymptomatic infectious diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B or hepatitis C. To assist potential and enrolled medical students in what can be a difficult and emotive area, most medical schools provide written information and access to counselling and to independent infectious diseases specialists. Students who carry such infections are not excluded from the medical course, but they will require advice as to whether any restrictions will be placed upon them in regard to their practical experience; for example in obstetrics, emergency departments or surgical electives. Similarly, in the intern year, certain areas of clinical practice may be subject to limitations; thus, early counselling is essential.