

Values of future healthcare specialists in wartime in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of the study is to define the values typical for medical students by analysing the career choice motivations in wartime in Ukraine.

Materials and Methods: Overview, Data Retrieval and Thematic Analysis (Braun&Clarke) methods were used. The total of 45 students' essays were analysed in the study.

Results: The professional values of future healthcare specialists in Ukraine in wartime have been defined: restoring health, believing in recovery, recovering the joy of life, helping the military (rehabilitation students); alleviating suffering, respecting dignity, giving people hope, helping them overcome illness (medical students); supporting people who have experienced trauma, providing psychological support in life hardships (clinical psychology students); health and beauty care, volunteer dental care for the military (dentist students). It is established that the frequency of mentions in student essays about the *war* as a factor in the development of medicine in present Ukraine and the *military* who need assistance in restoring health/rehabilitation is quite the same as the frequency of mentions of the concept of "compassion" as an important professional value of future healthcare specialists.

Conclusions: To support and develop professional values of medical students (empathy, compassion), implementing courses that help improve awareness of the role of healthcare specialists in wartime into medical school curricula is recommended; as well as to cooperate with institutions that take care for socially vulnerable groups of the population and persons affected by war; and to expand the system of mental health support for students.

KEY WORDS: values, medical students, empathy, compassion, war, combat veteran

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INTRODUCTION

The characteristic features of the present development of the healthcare are the rapid development of innovative technologies in the field of reproductology, transplantology, genetics, the use of artificial intelligence, etc. on the one hand, and on the other hand, the need for a transparent quality control of professional medical care and the implementation of bioethical principles that ensure protection of dignity of an individual and their interests as a patient. In order to prevent abuse in healthcare and conflicts between a doctor and a patient/patient's relatives, the training process in medical universities should be managed according to the appropriate ideological principles and values.

The effectiveness of the formation of professional values of future healthcare specialists depends on the initial worldview priorities of medical students and proper modelling of their academic activity. The efforts of teachers of a medical university can influence the correction/formation/development of the values of students as individuals and as future healthcare specialists

to some extent. Thus, the values already present in the context of career choice by the applicants for higher medical education should be defined in order to take these data into account when developing curricula and a system of educational activities. After all, each new generation of applicants is a "product" of a specific "era" that is expressed in the dominance of certain values, models of behaviour, individual and social ideals, lifestyle, principles of daily personal choice, as well as in the degree of awareness of the meaning of human life.

In this context, the issue of correlation of students' personal values and eternal moral values is urgent. World researchers emphasize the importance of moral values such as compassion and honesty in healthcare [1].

Using special reflective exercises, medical students can increase self-awareness/understanding and improve their ability to recognize situations in which conflicts may arise regarding their moral values and other personal values, which is likely to contribute to making moral decisions in clinical practice [1].

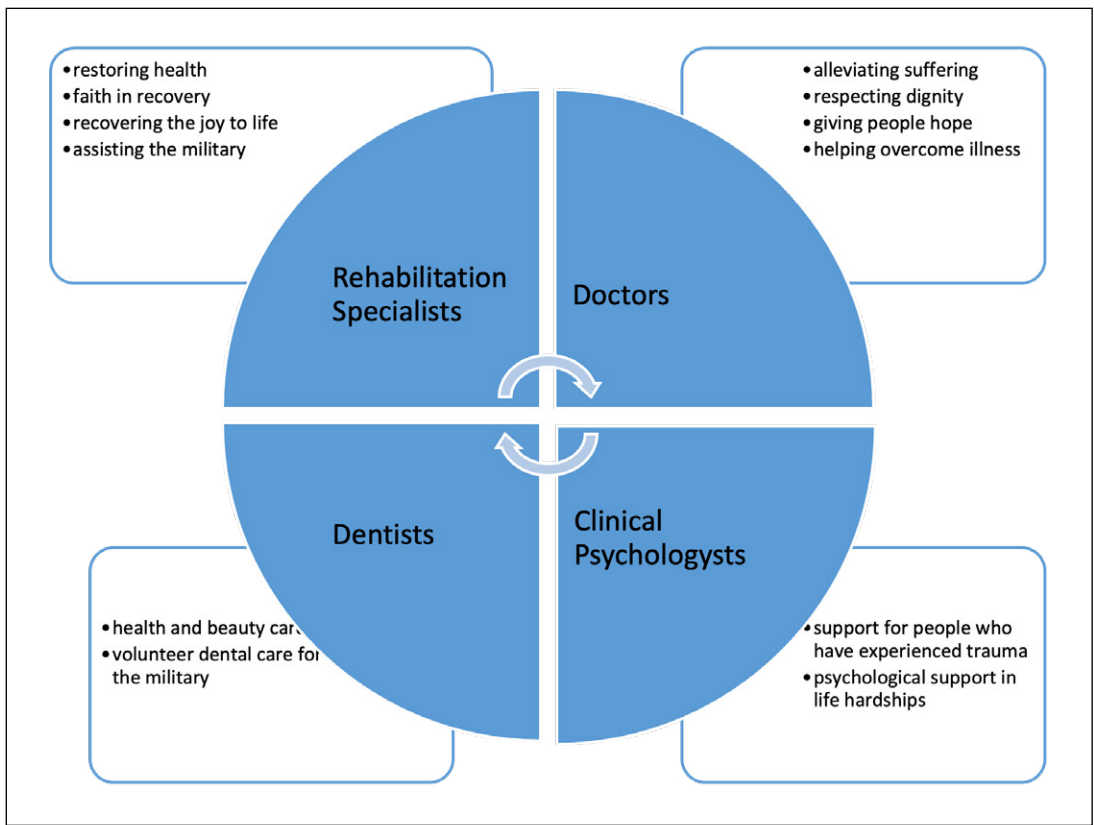


Fig. 1. Priority professional values of future healthcare specialists according to the results of the thematic analysis of student essays. *Figure designed by the authors*

Since medical university teachers work with the youth, “children of the time”, there is a great need in understanding students and establishing cooperation with them to form a worthy personality of a future medical specialist. For Ukraine, which is currently fighting to protect its freedom and dignity in the war against the Russian aggressor, the issue of formation of professional values in medical students is really urgent. After all, the Ukrainian medical community faces a number of complex challenges that require rethinking approaches to medical care delivery in wartime. The basis for an adequate response to the needs of Ukrainian military and civilians in wartime is the hierarchy of professional values of medical specialists who save lives in the most challenging military settings. Considering that more than half a thousand doctors, nurses and other healthcare specialists died in the war against Russia [2], development of higher medical education and motivation of the young generation not to be afraid of military realities, but to choose a future career following their heart, as a form of service and a large part of the meaning of the life, is crucial for Ukraine.

AIM

The aim of the study is to define the values that are typical for medical students by analysing the motivations for their career choice in the wartime in Ukraine.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To define the personal motivation of the career choice of future healthcare specialists, the research method of studying the written works (essays) of students justifying their individual choice in favour of the medical profession was used. The participants of the study were first-year students of the specialties of Medicine, Dentistry, Clinical Psychology, as well as second-year students of the specialty of Therapy and Rehabilitation, who entered Ternopil National Medical University during the third year of the full-scale war of Russia against Ukraine. Using the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke), 45 student essays have been studied and the priority professional values of future healthcare specialists have been defined that will contribute to the modification of curricula and modelling of educational tasks and activities for medical students.

RESULTS

According to the results of the thematic analysis of student essays, it has been established that the issue of personal career choice of young people living in Ukraine (with ongoing war) is much related to the challenges that the entire Ukrainian society is experiencing today. Substantiating their motivation to enter a medical university, the first-year students associate their future professional practice with the needs of their people,

who are defending their freedom and dignity in a war. Therefore, Ukrainian military and civilians do need professional medical care to save lives, as well as to restore physical and mental health. The main professional values of future healthcare specialists declared in students' essays have been defined and summarized (Fig. 1).

This is the way the future rehabilitation specialists expressed their desire to help patients restore their health, which, accordingly, recovers the joy of life. Since the war is ongoing in Ukraine, the first-year students defined giving a faith in recovery to those who suffered from military actions as a priority. In this context, helping the military after injuries/captivity is the most important. Please study a few quotes from the essays of future rehabilitation specialists:

"It was interesting for me to watch people recovering after injury and returning to a full life. I wish to be a rehabilitation specialist and help people. I chose Ukraine because medicine in Ukraine is also quite developed, and in wartime the efforts of a rehabilitation specialist is especially valuable because many people have injuries."

"My neighbour was seriously injured in the war, a broken pelvic bone. He is currently undergoing treatment, then rehabilitation. It is very valuable to me that he, like many of our soldiers, defends me, my family, my city. I also would like to be involved in some way in our victory over the enemy Russia, and this will be my professional assistance to wounded soldiers, to help them recover and have a more or less comfortable life again."

A sincere desire to help people restore their health motivated future rehabilitation specialists to enter a medical university:

"Since childhood, I have been interested in biology and studied well. In high school, I realized that I wished to help people. At first, I thought about being a psychologist, but when I studied human recovery, I first came across the specialty of Therapy and Rehabilitation. As it turned out, a physical therapist is a medical specialist, who helps restore and maintain the physical health of a patient.

When I decided on a career, I faced a question of choosing a university: medical or non-medical. I thought for a long time and researched the differences between institutions. It turned out that in some non-medical universities, physical therapist education is based mainly on sports training, not on the medical aspects of recovery, so I decided to choose a medical university. I hope that in the future I will become a physical therapist who helps people."

It is typical that future rehabilitation specialists do understand the problems which people with special needs face as if having been "in their shoes". A quote from the student's essay:

"My decision to enter a medical university was not made in one day. It was a long way of self-discovery and awareness of what I wish to do for the rest of my life. I have always been fascinated by the opportunity to help people by not only treating diseases, but also returning them the joy of full-fledged movement and active life. That is why I have chosen the specialty of Therapy and Rehabilitation. It combines profound medical knowledge with practical methods of patients' health restoration. I understood that this profession would require not only theoretical knowledge but also empathy, patience and constant self-development. Now, being a second-year student, I feel that I made the right choice. Every day brings new knowledge and confirms that medicine is my true calling. I dream of becoming a specialist who can restore people's faith in recovery and help them feel the joy of simple things that healthy people take for granted."

The results of the thematic analysis of essays written by future dentists demonstrate the students' desire to get a medical education in order to provide health and beauty care to their patients. The theses about the desire to provide volunteer (free) dental care to the military are really touching:

"A beautiful smile is very desirable by a modern person, especially women. And I wish to help people have such a beautiful and at the same time healthy smile. But this is not the only reason. It is unclear how long the war goes on, and the military need dental services and I would like to assist them professionally. I dream of contributing my share to volunteer activities as a dentist."

The analysis of the essays of future doctors has found out that students note several main values for which they strive to become a doctor. This is the desire to help a patient, alleviate their suffering, be attentive, compassionate and honest, respectful for the dignity of the patient, tolerant, and also give people hope, especially to the military, who have suffered as a result of military operations. In fact, many students associate their career choice with the desire to join the common cause of defending their native country.

Please see some quotes:

"I decided to become a doctor to be competent and able to help people. Firstly, I would like to give people joy in this way. Secondly, my goal is to contribute to the development of medicine in my country which suffers today due to war. I realize that it is challenging and even dangerous to be a doctor in our time, but my life will be meaningful about being able to help those defending us from the enemy."

"As for me, the profession of a doctor is the most important of all professions because only a doctor re-

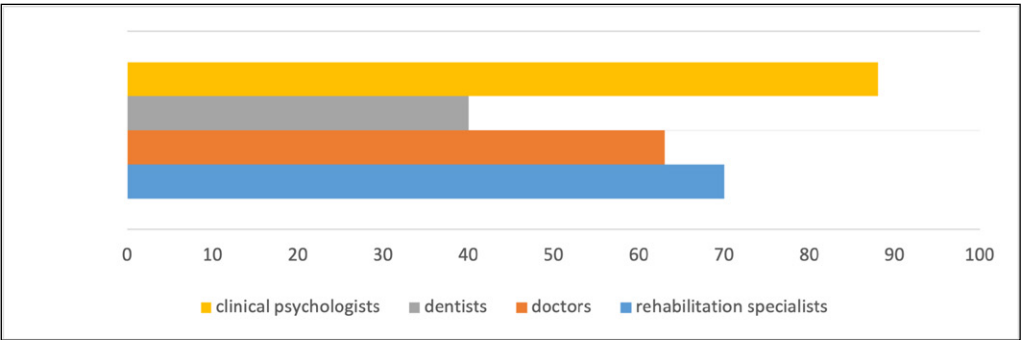


Fig. 2. Mentioning the value of “compassion” in student essays: quantitative analysis (%).
Figure designed by the authors

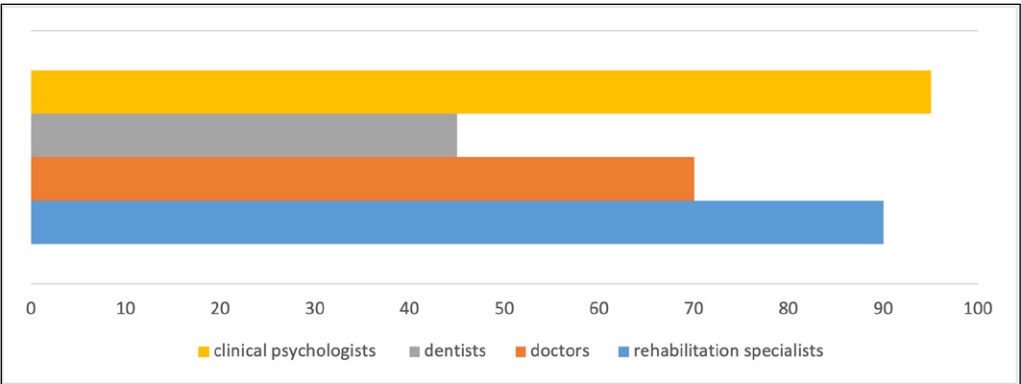


Fig. 3. Mentioning the concepts of “military”/“war” in student essays: quantitative analysis (%).
Figure designed by the authors

stores people’s health and saves lives, especially now, during the war. I would like to contribute to the victory of Ukraine, to support the health of our defenders.”

“I have decided to enter a medical university because I wish to help people and be valuable to society. I am interested in how the human body works, how diseases can be treated and pain can be alleviated. The profession of a doctor is a great responsibility, but at the same time an opportunity to save lives and support those in need. My motivation is to become an expert, constantly develop and do good to people.”

“I have realized that I wish to dedicate my life to a meaningful profession that benefits people. I would like to learn not only to treat, but also to support, listen, explain and give faith in recovery to my future patients. Based on the example of my grandfather, who suffered from an illness for a long time and needed special care, I realize how important it is for our country to have doctors who are not only professionals, but also humanists. I will try to become one of them.”

It should be noted that since 2025, an educational and professional program “Clinical Psychology” has been launched at I. Horbachevsky Ternopil National Medical University to train specialists in psychological counselling, diagnostics and mental health support. The results of the thematic analysis of student essays of future clinical psychologists indicate that the basic professional values for them are: support for people who have experienced trauma (primarily military personnel), and psychological care to people in life hardships.

Please study a few quotes:

“I would like to help those in hardships, support them in difficult situations and show that there is always light at the end of the tunnel. I would especially like to be beneficial to people who experienced stress, loss or other various challenges during the war, which has been going on for four years already. This is challenging, but my future profession of a clinical psychologist will help me deliver professional support for such people.”

“I chose the career of a clinical psychologist but not a general practitioner because I believe that mental health is no less important than physical health. Clinical psychology allows understanding person’s inner world more deeply, the causes of their anxiety, fear, stress, as well as psychosomatic disorders. My motivation involves the desire to support people in crisis situations, to heal with a word that can save the desperate.”

“I decided to enter medical school because already in childhood I understood that helping people in difficult life situations is very important. Especially since my father is a military, and his service showed me what psychological burdens military personnel and their families face. This has prejudiced my career choice because I really wish to at least slightly reduce the pain that torments the souls of our defenders and their families after the war experience.”

“My choice to become a clinical psychologist originates from my life experience. Nowadays, a lot of people in Ukraine need psychological support. Therefore, I think that I will be able to get a job and care for myself

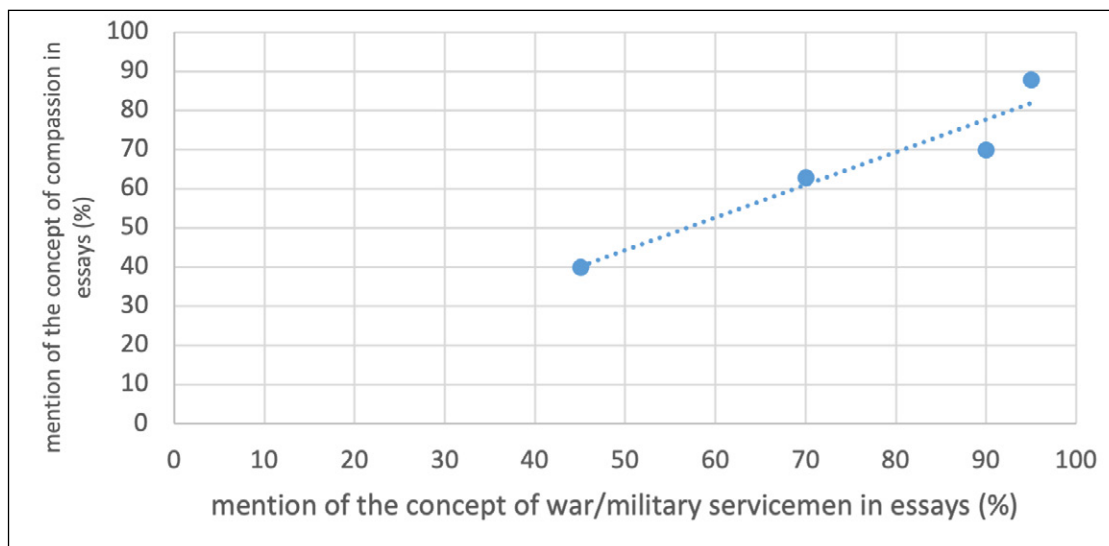


Fig. 4. Correlation between mention of the concepts of “war/serviceman” and “compassion”. Figure designed by the authors

and my family in the future. I am already trying to support my relatives and friends, who often feel fear and anxiety because of the war. Studying at the university will help me do it professionally. The most important thing is our state of mind because our well-being depends on it.”

“In my undergraduate studies, I plan to gain the necessary foundation so that in the future I can professionally recognise the causes of human internal conflicts and help resolve them. I believe that the profession of a clinical psychologist allows me becoming a reliable support for many people since mental health directly affects the quality of life and can even preserve it (I mean suicide prevention).”

Analysis of student essays was aimed at finding out whether they contain the concept of “compassion”, which we interpret as one of the most important professional values of healthcare specialists, reflecting person’s willingness and ability to feel and show emotions of understanding, benevolence and a desire to alleviate the pain/suffering of another person. The issue of studying this professional value is urgent owing to its increased significance as well as the frequent cases of a recent destructive model of behaviour of doctors, who show callousness/indifference rather than compassion for the patient (students spoke about such cases when studying the topic of “The rights of a patient” during the classes of Medical Law).

According to the results of the thematic analysis of student essays (Fig. 2), it was established that the most common meaning of the concept of “compassion” is found in the essays of future clinical psychologists (88%) that is explained by the high level of understanding of the specific features of the chosen profession. It implies compassion as an essential condition for the effective work of a clinical psychologist, who works with a del-

icate category, the human soul, which is extremely vulnerable. Future rehabilitation specialists (70%) are the second regarding the frequency of mentioning the concept of “compassion” that is associated with the acceptance of the fact of cooperation with patients with injuries, loss of limbs, impaired body functions due to war, and this involves compassionate attitude and sincere desire to help those affected.

A total of 63% of future doctors mentioned compassion in their essays as a value of the chosen profession that is explained by a decreased relevance of the compassionate attitude of general practitioners compare to clinical psychologists and rehabilitation specialists, who work mainly with socially vulnerable population. In addition, 40% of future dentists mentioned the concept of “compassion” in their essays usually drawing attention to the need for professional dental care for the military and internally displaced persons.

Actually, the aim was to find out how often the students participating in our study would mention the concept of “serviceman”/“war” in their essays taking into account that they chose the medical profession during the third year of the war of Russia against Ukraine. The results of the thematic analysis are presented in Fig. 3.

Thus, it was found out that almost all clinical psychologists (95%) wrote in their essays about the war as an objective factor in the development of contemporary medicine in Ukraine and the increased demand for their chosen profession. Three students noted that the war directly affected their families (their father or other relatives were defenders of the Armed Forces of Ukraine) and this became the key motive for their desire to become a clinical psychologist. Almost the same number of rehabilitation specialists (90%) mentioned the concept of “serviceman”/“war” when justifying their career choice. They also gave examples of their friends

who had suffered in military operations and need professional rehabilitation. Apparently, such life stories were especially motivating for the students. Among the doctors who wrote essays, 70% of the authors mentioned servicemen as future patients whom they would like to help improve their health and “alleviate suffering”. And less than half of dentists (45%) described their career choice mentioning the need to provide dental services to military personnel; 4 students expressed a desire to provide volunteer care to the servicemen of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

The results of the thematic analysis indicate a correlation between the mention of the concepts of “war/serviceman” and “compassion” in student essays (Fig. 4).

The analysis of the data obtained has proved that the frequency of mentioning the war as a factor in the development of medicine in present Ukraine and military personnel who need help in restoring health/rehabilitation is almost the same as the frequency of mentioning the concept of “compassion” as an important professional value of future healthcare specialists. Thus, the students associate the concept of “compassion” with those future patients who defend the Ukrainian state with weapons in their hands today. This is facilitated, in particular, by the distribution of videos on social networks (students use them much today) about seriously wounded military personnel who are constantly admitted into military hospitals and clinics in various cities of Ukraine.

DISCUSSION

Our study reflects the characteristic features of future healthcare specialists training in Ukraine in wartime on the one hand, and on the other hand it is related to typical problems of the development of higher medical education in Europe and the world at the beginning of the 21st century. Thus, the issue of forming an adequate system of values for future healthcare specialists when human dignity and compassion are priorities for the doctor (including the clinician lecturer) regardless of the social status, nationality or religious beliefs of the patient/student, is urgent for contemporary healthcare. As reported by medical students, unprofessionalism and prejudice have significantly affected their wellbeing and trust in the medical profession. They felt demoralized, anxious or indifferent to the environment where they were exposed to unprofessional behaviour or prejudiced attitudes [3]. Comprehending this matter responsible institutions should create an environment where medical students are inspired to embody the values of diversity, equality and inclusion, and to manage the complex psychosocial factors and cultural influences in

order to change the current culture of patient care [3].

According to the research results, Ukrainian medical students pay special attention to the needs of people with injuries, impaired body functions, loss of limbs due to war, etc. Mostly this is about military personnel, but in other countries, medical students also need to develop communication skills and form an inclusive culture. Present researchers emphasize it as well pointing to the need to cultivate respect for the dignity of people with disabilities. For example, a specific aim of teaching rehabilitation nursing is to help students respond to people with deformities and disabilities in a way that conveys belief in their dignity and value [4]. This educational objective specifically reflects the aims of contemporary medical education in Ukraine where a huge number of military personnel and civilians are victims of war not only physically but also mentally hurt.

To understand such patients, compassion for them and a desire to help them are essential. In the developed countries with no war, the desire to help another person decreases, as claimed by present researchers [5]. Therefore, they emphasize the indispensable role of the humanities and arts, which help in the formation of a humanistic worldview of physicians, since they allow doctors to understand patients in their holistic context. They also reflect a huge range of attitudes necessary for the formation of ethics and professionalism, and illustrate complex moral choices. Life stories and narratives enhance emotions and, thus, lay the foundation for the transmission of concepts [5]. These theses are confirmed by the results of our study: the students who wrote essays about examples from the lives of specific individuals, military personnel, noted their compassion and desire to help people, whose physical and mental health was affected due to the war.

One of the special methods of development of a humane personality of a doctor is to involve students in a ceremony in honour of body donors who altruistically donated their bodies that allows studying anatomy through dissection [6]. In this context, Ukrainian students develop the humanistic values, in particular, by paying tribute to fallen soldiers who died at the front-line. They do this every day at 9 a.m. during a minute of silence to give tribute to the soldiers, who gave their lives for Ukraine in the ongoing war.

Considering recent studies of changes in the level of empathy of medical students, which usually decreases during training (junior students show a higher level of empathy than senior students) [7], medical university teachers should improve the methodology for development of a system of professional values of students, among which empathy and compassion are prioritized.

In the era of digitalization of the training process, it

is important not to forget creative writing as a method of developing empathy and compassion. A number of present researchers confirm its effectiveness [8, 9]. Thus, Hatem et al. share the positive experience of introducing an elective course "Creative Writing for Medical Students", which gave students the opportunity to write and discuss the challenges and specific issues they face during their professional training as doctors (this involves the boundaries of medicine, death and dying, anticipating future challenges and identifying with a patient, etc.) [8]. By the way, the students of Ternopil National Medical University also have the opportunity for reflection within the framework of the elective course "Academic Writing", and teachers (in particular A. Vykhreshch, a co-author of this article) can thus find out students' concerns, follow up their views on the current issues of student youth and medicine.

Indeed, reflective writing is effective for improving the ethical understanding of palliative care in the context of medical education. The results of the study by Lopane et al. have confirmed that nursing students (after watching a film about terminal illness and end-of-life decision-making) show in their written reflections an increased awareness of ethical dimensions, such as patient autonomy, vulnerability, and the value of nonverbal communication [9]. The results of our study on the desire of Ukrainian medical students to serve people, in particular the victims of war, also confirm the effectiveness of creative writing for increasing the students' awareness of professional values already at the beginning of their training at a medical university.

In addition, modern researchers point to cinema as a separate pedagogical tool for development of empathy as a basic professional value of future health care specialists. Thus, Arora et al., studying the influence of cinema on the education of dental students, has found out that the results of film education are: increased understanding and practice of empathy, improved ability to recognize and respond to patients' emotions and appreciate different points of view [10]. The positive perception and acceptance of films with educational potential by students proves a high possibility of integrating this pedagogical tool into the curriculum. By the way, the students of Ternopil National Medical University are also periodically invited to watch films, in particular about doctors (i.e., "Giuseppe Moscatti: Love that Heals", "The Good Doctor"), the value of human support ("Train on December 31") that contribute to the development of empathy, compassion and self-sacrifice of future healthcare specialists, especially during the war in Ukraine. This is happening within the framework of the Cinema Evenings project initiated by the university student creative team in order to increase students'

motivation to improve their professional development via the example of famous doctors.

In this context, the experience of developing a comprehensive program with an approach to compassion based on awareness that meets this need is very interesting [11] and the Compassionate University project, which informs, trains and mobilizes students and professionals to develop networks of care for people at the end of life [12], so that compassion as a value goes beyond professional competencies, and care for people spreads beyond the university. The students of Ternopil National Medical University also have the opportunity to develop their communication skills and improve empathy within the framework of the university's cooperation with the "House of Mercy of Saint Veronica", where elderly women left without care in difficult life circumstances receive care by nuns. Such experience is very relevant, because, as recent research shows, elderly people who are also a socially vulnerable group (poor, lonely, etc.) are in great need of support in obtaining medical information and forming health-promoting behaviour [13].

A specific aspect of this problem is the self-esteem of medical students and its development. We agree with researchers [14] who emphasize the need to develop the training programs and educational activities in a medical university that contribute to the development of professional values of self-compassion and moral courage, as well as the protection of mental health of future healthcare specialists. Such an approach is very important for organization of the training in medical universities in Ukraine in wartime. Thus, a Mental Health Center has been launched at Ternopil National Medical University, where students can receive group or individual professional support from psychologists and psychotherapists. Taking into account that crises may be an opportunity for the moral development of the individual [15], war as a global crisis is the external factor that prompts serious intrapersonal transformations of Ukrainian students. As future healthcare specialists they get a unique experience of moral self-development in order to survive and help other people stand, not break, in the tragic realities of war.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study show the need to support and develop the values of empathy and compassion in first-year and second-year medical university students with a high level of acceptance of these values in the context of their career choice motivation. The defined correlation between war as an external factor and compassion as a professional value of future doctors

encourages the implementation of courses into medical university curricula that contribute to improving awareness of the role of healthcare specialists in war. Since students, who mentioned the experience of their military relatives or friends in their essays, wrote more emotionally and empathetically, it is worth using these cases when teaching clinical and humanitarian disci-

plines in order to increase the compassionate attitude of future doctors. Cooperation with institutions that care for socially vulnerable groups of the population, as well as expanding the system of mental health support for students, especially in times of war, are promising areas of educational affairs of a medical university in Ukraine and other countries.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Author declare no conflict of interest

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