

AWARENESS OF POTENTIAL ETHICAL OBJECTIONS TO LOW MOLECULAR WEIGHT HEPARINS AMONGST CLINICIANS

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OBJECTIVE

Low molecular weight heparins (LMWH) are commonly prescribed medications, used for prevention and treatment of thromboembolism. All low molecular weight heparins are derived from pigs' intestines. Some patients may have religious or ethical objections to receiving medications that originated from animals, in particular those of porcine origin. The primary objective of this study was to ascertain current clinician knowledge regarding this fact, and views regarding discussing this with patients. We also sought to understand what current practice is with regards to provision of information to patients is, establish an opinion on clinicians' ethical obligations and determine awareness of suitable alternatives where objections are held.

DESIGN

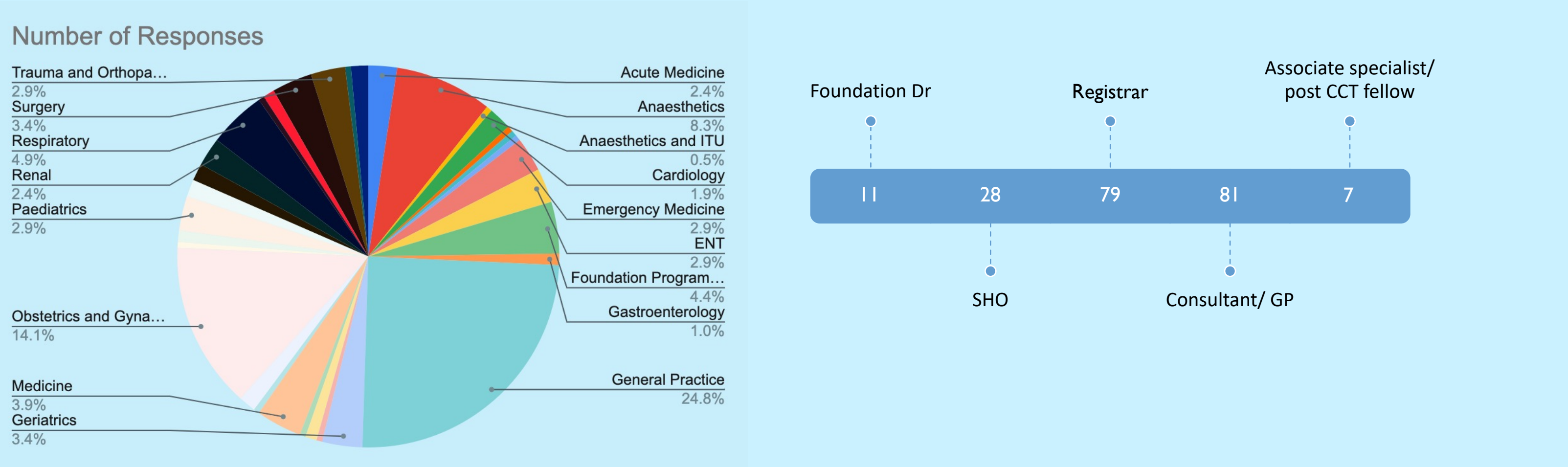
A cross-speciality survey asked respondents whether they were aware of the porcine-nature of LMWH, and if so whether they currently inform patients of this. Where respondents had been previously unaware, they were asked about what their future practice would be. Respondents were also asked which patients, if any, they felt should be informed about the porcine nature of Low Molecular Weight Heparins, and were asked what alternatives they were aware of, that were not derived from pigs. An online survey was chosen due to the ease of dissemination and access for participants, allowing for more responses to be gathered from the widest range of clinicians possible. At the initial stages of this research, we only asked respondents practicing in Wales, with the aim to increase this to the rest of the UK at a later date.

METHODS

A response target of 200 clinicians across Wales was set, with 206 responses received. The survey was disseminated through peer networks, with the aim to reach as many grades and specialties as possible in order to be representative. The only exclusion criteria was not having prescribed LMWH previously.

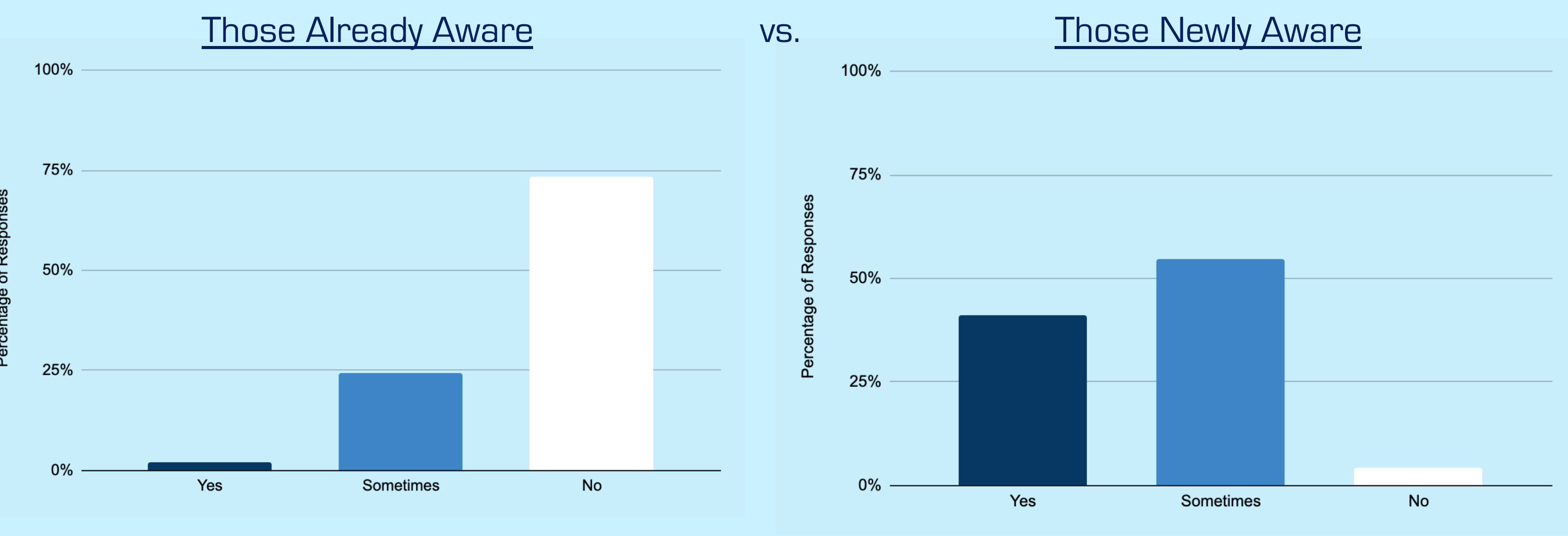
RESULTS

206 responses were received from 33 specialties. All training and non-training grades were represented in the results.

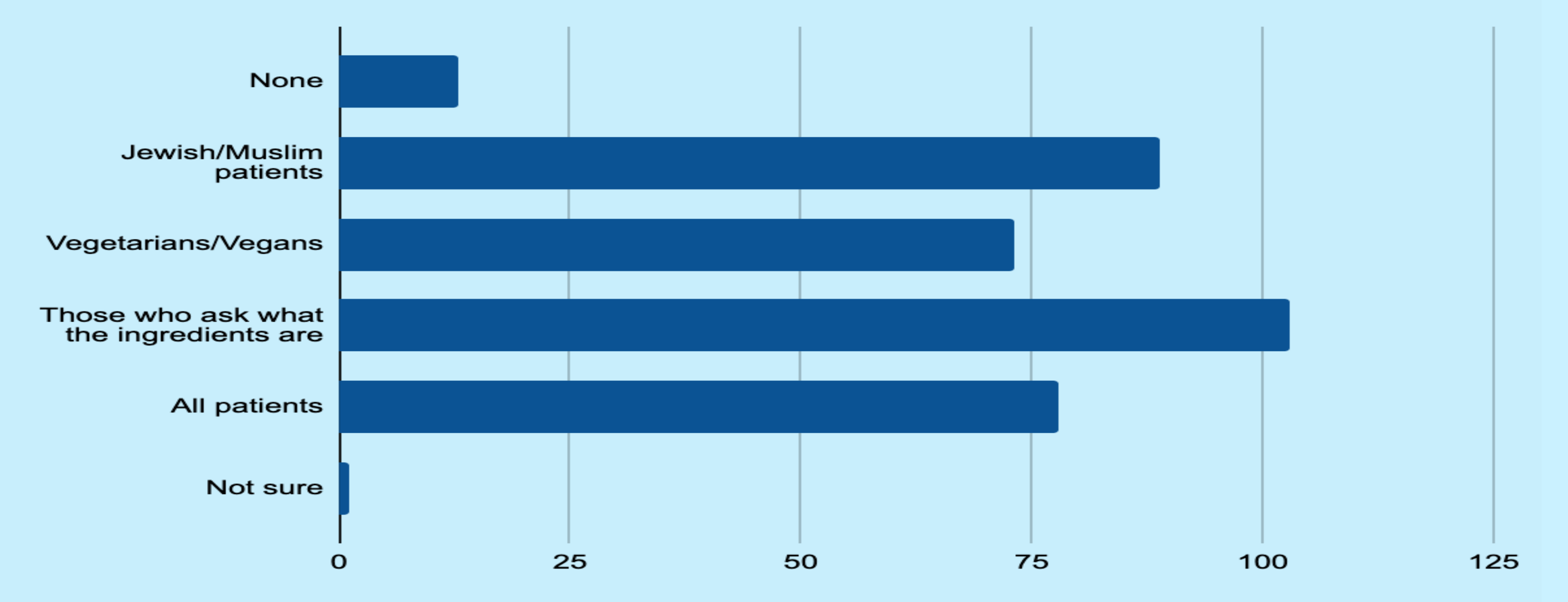


Prior to taking the survey, 45 respondents (21.8%) were aware that low molecular weight heparins are derived from pigs, whereas 161 (78.2%) were not aware.

Of those previously aware, only 1 respondent (2.2%) tells every patient, 11 respondents (24.4%) sometimes do and 33 respondents (73.3%) never do. This is in contrast to those who had found out by taking this survey, where 66 respondents (41%) stated they would now tell every patient, 88 respondents (54.7%) stated they sometimes would, and only 7 respondents (4.3%) stated they never would. This difference between what is done and what we feel we will do highlights the disparity between actual practice and ideal practice.



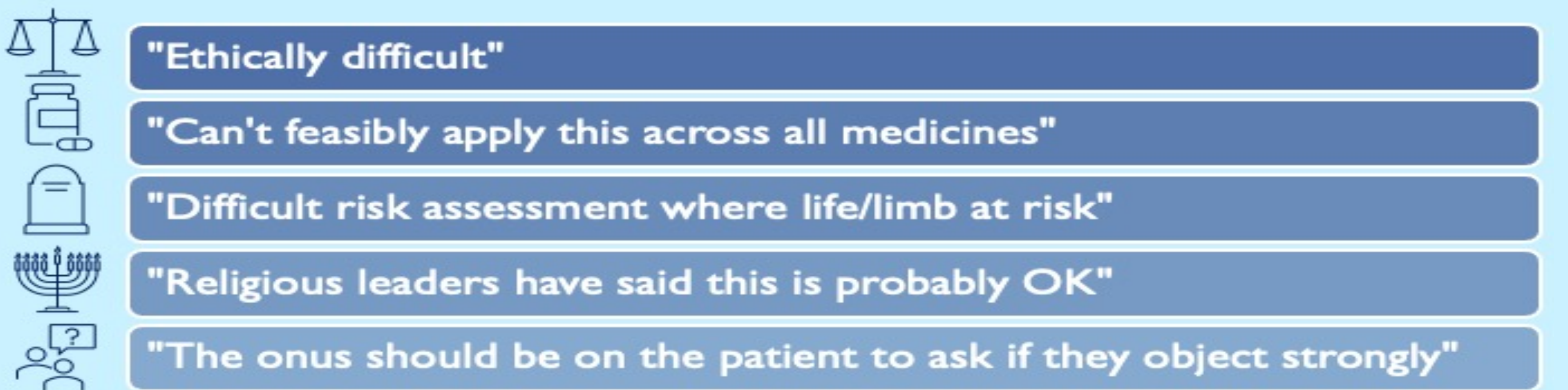
When asked which patients should be told, the most common response was that only those who ask what the ingredients are should be told.



Of those asked, only 7 were aware that Fondaparinux Sodium is an alternative for treatment or prophylaxis of VTE that does not have a porcine origin. The limitation with this alternative in obstetrics is the lack of data regarding safety in pregnancy and breastfeeding, with the manufacturer advising to avoid unless benefit outweighs risk during pregnancy, and to avoid in breastfeeding due to excretion in breastmilk.

DISCUSSION

A free-test comment box was provided for respondents, with many using this to voice their discomfort with this subject matter.



This opens up the debate as to whether the onus is on clinicians to tell patients what they are being treated with, or for patients to do their own research and state their objections to the clinician. The most compelling comparison is with the administration of blood products, where clinicians ask all patients if they have an objection, rather than relying on patients to state their objections. There is little guidance for clinicians regarding their ethical, and legal obligations with these situations. The GMC states "Your judgement will depend on the specific circumstances of each decision, including [...] the patient's individual circumstances. Whilst Montgomery specifically applied to consent, the principle of discussing what the patient would find significant can be applied here. The Health and Social care Act of 2008 states "Care and treatment of service users can only be provided with the consent of the relevant person, which, if we apply Montgomery, means we should tell patients who may object to porcine products regarding the origins of low molecular weight heparins. Since we cannot determine from initial assessment which patients this may be, this leaves us in a position where we may need to discuss this with all patients.

CONCLUSION

Opinion on this matter varies widely, with no clear consensus. It is the opinion of the authors that an ethics statement is required to advise clinicians on their ethical, and perhaps legal obligations when prescribing porcine-derived products such as low molecular weight heparins. Given the prevalence of prescriptions for these medications within obstetrics and gynecology, this issue is particularly pertinent to our specialty, and involvement of the RCOG in formulating an ethics statement would provide clarity to its members going forward.

