

# PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY IN DISTRICT HOSPITALS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: PILOT STUDY

Victor BABUCI, Master in Public Health;  
Adriana PALADI, PhD in Philosophy; Alina  
TIMOTIN, PhD in Economics; Professor Oleg  
LOZAN, MD-PhD.

<sup>1</sup> School of Public Health State University of Medicine  
and Pharmacy „Nicolae Testemițanu”

<sup>2</sup> School of Public Health State University of Medicine  
and Pharmacy „Nicolae Testemițanu”

<sup>3</sup> School of Public Health State University of Medicine  
and Pharmacy „Nicolae Testemițanu”

<sup>4</sup> School of Public Health State University of Medicine  
and Pharmacy „Nicolae Testemițanu”

Corresponding Author:

Victor BABUCI

victorbabuci@yahoo.com

Tel.: (+373) 69 62 83 73

## CONTEXT

Corruption is a phenomenon with roots in distant historical times. However, significant interest in the subject dates back to the 1990s when there was a noticeable increase in corruption worldwide, as well as a development in the population's awareness of these risks. [1] Paraphrasing one of the most cited definitions of "corruption," provided by the World Bank, we can say that corruption refers to the phenomenon of abusing entrusted professional power for personal gain, [2] as well as to ethically questionable behaviors that undermine or damage public trust. [3]

Transparency International is an international association that annually assesses the Corruption Perceptions Index (hereinafter CPI) in countries around the world on a scale from 0 to 100, where zero points mean "highly corrupt," and 100 points mean "very clean." According to the association's 2022 report [4], the CPI for the Republic of Moldova was 39 points, ranking the country 91st out of 180 evaluated countries and placing it alongside Belarus, Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, and Ethiopia. At the same time, the CPI shows an increase of 3 points compared to the previous year, reflecting a positive trend compared to 2021.

One of the social sectors widely affected by corruption worldwide is the healthcare sector. The effects of corruption in healthcare are manifold, and among those confirmed, one can mention: a significant increase in mortality rates, a reduction in life expectancy, a decrease in immunization rates, etc. [5] In the Republic of Moldova, the healthcare sector is also vulnerable to corruption. According to the annual report of the National Anticorruption Center of the Republic of Moldova for the year 2022 [6], the Ministry of Health and its subordinate institutions rank 4th on the list of entities affected by corruption, with 45 documented cases and 27 individuals involved in corruption offenses in the healthcare sector.

**CONTEXT:** Institutional integrity refers to the quality of public institutions in being impartial, responsible, transparent, and ethical in fulfilling their role in society. Awareness of the importance of ensuring an atmosphere of integrity in institutions is a factor that can lead to changes in the attitudes and behaviors of employees. In this study, we aimed to explore the perceptions of medical staff in regional hospitals in the Republic of Moldova regarding integrity behavior to understand the potential risks and vulnerabilities in this area.

**METHODS:** The descriptive, quantitative study included all healthcare workers from six regional hospitals in the Republic of Moldova, distributed across the three regions of the country (north, center and south). Data were collected through a questionnaire developed for the study. The questionnaires were completed by 703 doctors and nurses.

**RESULTS:** The majority of respondents had received training in continuing medical education programs on integrity and understood what constitutes an integral medical institution. Approximately half of the respondents considered the measures taken by regional hospital administrations to ensure an integrity climate in the institution sufficient. Risk factors for institutional integrity, according to respondents, include insufficient involvement of medical staff in decision-making at the institutional level and situations involving inappropriate influence by leadership. The legal regime of the gifts was also identified as a vulnerability in the study.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Medical workers show a relatively clear understanding of institutional integrity, with most supporting meritocracy, transparency, and fairness. However, there are still gaps in ensuring an integrity climate in regional hospitals in the country, as perceived by a significant portion of the participating medical staff.

**Keywords:** „perceptions”, „corruption”, „hospital”, „institutional integrity”, „medical staff”, „integrity risk”.

With the promulgation of the Integrity Law in 2017 [7], constant efforts have been made in the Republic of Moldova to reduce corruption in public institutions. An effective way to combat corruption is the development of integrity standards in governance and the promotion of moral attitudes and behaviors in the exercise of professional duties. Taking this into account, continuous education programs on institutional integrity have been created for medical personnel to increase awareness of corruption risks and establish the foundations for an institutional culture based on ethics and responsibility. In support of these programs, instructional materials have been developed, including the Medical Integrity Guide for the Republic of Moldova, 2019 [8]. According to this guide, institutional integrity reflects the quality of public institutions operating impartially, responsibly, transparently, and ethically in fulfilling their functions within society. This concept assumes that public institutions act in the general interest of the community, adhering to principles of fairness, honesty, and impartiality, without being influenced by private or group interests.

In this context, we aimed to explore the perceptions of medical personnel regarding integrity in district hospital institutions and to identify strengths and possible weaknesses of the measures taken to ensure institutional integrity in district hospitals in the Republic of Moldova.

## METHODS

To achieve the stated objective, a cross-sectional, descriptive study was conducted. The target population comprised medical personnel from six district hospitals, with two hospitals selected from each of the country's three geographic regions (north, central, and south). The selection criteria for the institutions in the study were the presence of an operating room, the existence of a perinatal center, as well as departments of anesthesia/intensive care and traumatology. The inclusion criteria for medical personnel in the study were to be actively involved in the operating room, perinatal center, anesthesia, and intensive care units, as well as traumatology departments, and to accept participation in the study.

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire developed based on specialized literature. It consisted of 32 semi-open and closed questions, including single and multiple-choice selection, scale-type questions, grouped into three categories: "Socio-demographic Data," "Specific Data," and "Practices." The questionnaire was self-administered in a physical (offline) format and did not collect personally identifiable information (anonymous). A total of 703 completed questionnaires were received and validated, and the collected data were processed using Excel software. The study was conducted from October 2022 to April 2023.

## RESULTS

According to the data, the target group consisting of medical workers is composed of: women accounting for 88.5%; residents of urban areas (53.1%); individuals aged between 45 and 54 years (28.4%) and over 55 years (30.9%); nursing assistants (individuals with secondary medical education) accounting for 74.7%; medical staff with work experience of over 30 years comprising 33.6%; medical personnel trained in institutional integrity accounting for 72%.

In legal terms, integrity within organizations is defined as the professional integrity of all employees, which is controlled and reinforced by the institution's leadership. Therefore, the institution's leadership sets the tone and direction for integrity, and employees' responsibility lies in acting ethically and legally and contributing to institutional integrity through their actions.

The study evaluated the perception of medical workers regarding the mentioned aspects and found that respondents have a relatively clear understanding of what institutional integrity represents by definition. Thus, the vast majority argue that "the integrity of an institution is determined by the correct legal and ethical behavior of both the leadership and employees." At the same time, just over 30% of respondents fall outside the correct assessment of institutional integrity, attributing importance only to

Figure 1. Opinions regarding institutional integrity

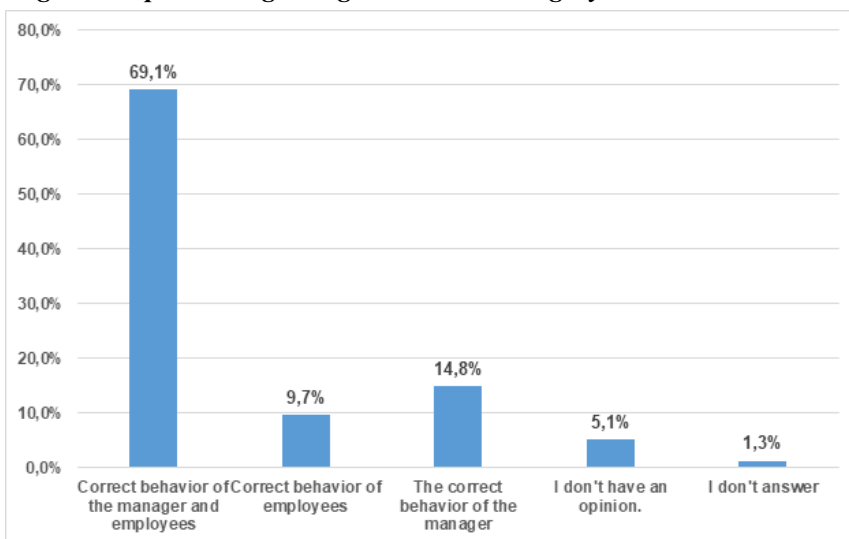
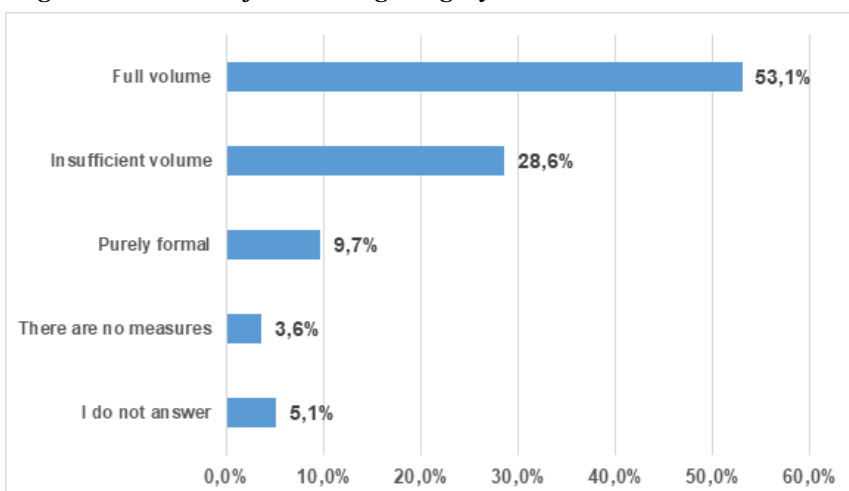


Figure 2. Measures for ensuring integrity



the correct behavior of the leadership in about half of the cases (Figure 1).

The study highlighted the perspectives of respondents regarding the critical role of medical institution administration in promoting and implementing measures to ensure institutional integrity. Of the total number of respondents, 53.1% believe that legal recommendations and integrity standards are fully implemented in district hospitals nationwide, while approximately 42% consider that institutional-level measures to ensure an atmosphere of integrity are either insufficiently implemented, carried out formally, or nonexistent (Figure 2). These data suggest that a significant portion of respondents are aware of existing gaps in promoting integrity in the institutions where they work.

Attitudes towards the conditions of institutional integrity were explored through a series of statements formulated following legal requirements regarding the assurance of an integrity climate in public institutions (Integrity Law no. 82 of 2017), for which respondents were required to express their agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale (Figure 3). Correspondingly, the data show that the majority of respondents express "full or partial agreement" with the following: hiring and promoting

Figure 3. Opinions regarding institutional integrity

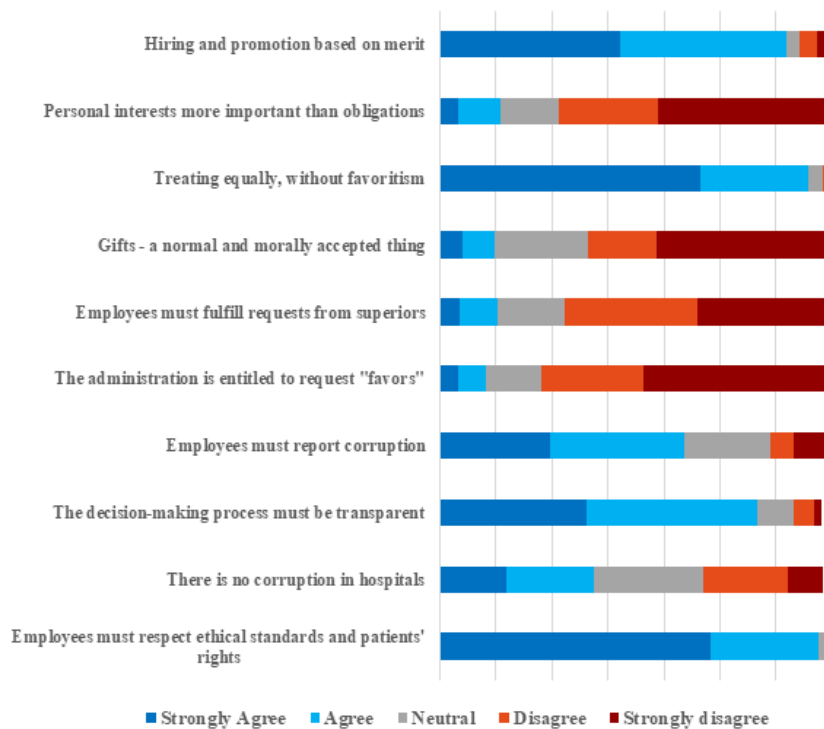


Figure 4. Inclusion in the decision-making process

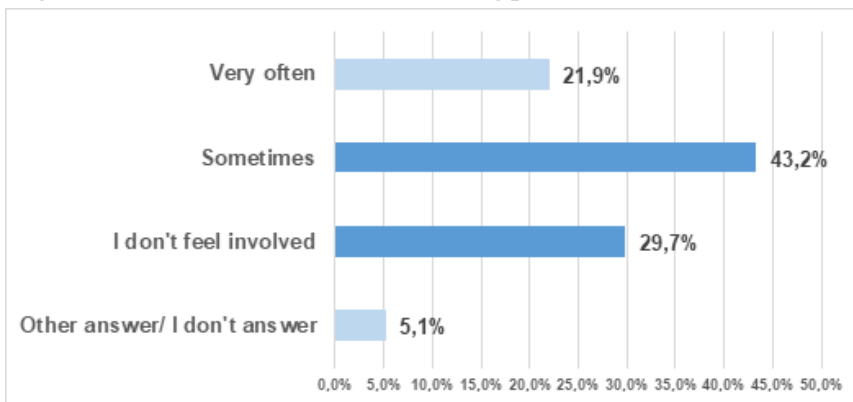
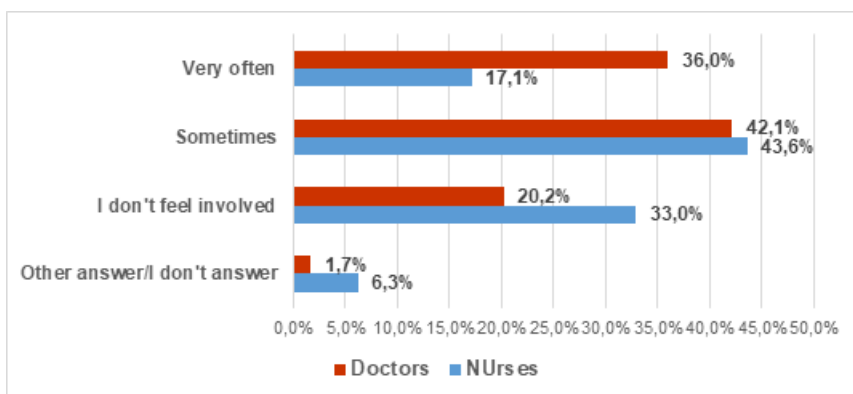


Figure 5. Inclusion in the decision-making process of doctors vs. nurses



medical staff should be based on merit (approx. 88%); institution leadership should treat employees fairly (approx. 93%); employees should adhere to ethical norms (approx.

96%); the decision-making process should be transparent (approx. 80%). A significant majority of respondents (approx. 72% of respondents) respond with "partial or total disagreement" to the statement that institution leadership is entitled to request "favors" from employees. Similarly, the majority express "partial or total disagreement" regarding the idea that personal interests are more important than job obligations in professional activity (approx. 67%). A comparable result was obtained for the statement that fulfilling requests from superiors, even if they contradict integrity rules, is acceptable (approx. 66%). Furthermore, approximately 62% of respondents express "full or partial agreement" with the statement that employees should report acts of corruption.

For some of the proposed statements, responses are less unequivocal. These pertain to accepting gifts from patients and the absence of corruption in hospitals. Regarding the topic of gifts, approximately 60% of respondents express "partial or total disagreement" with the statement that "Requesting and accepting gifts from patients is a normal and morally acceptable thing," while 14% express "partial or total agreement," and approximately 23.9% remain "neutral." On the topic of the presence of corruption in hospitals, approximately 39.3% of respondents are "completely or partially in agreement" with the statement that there is no corruption in hospital institutions, while approximately 58% remain "neutral" (27.7%) or express "partial or total disagreement" (32.3%) regarding its absence in hospitals.

It should be noted that a significant portion of respondents took a neutral position on several statements, such as "employees should report acts of corruption" (16.8%); "requesting and accepting gifts from patients - a normal and morally accepted thing" (23.9%); "there is no corruption in hospitals" (27.7%). The given topics are sufficiently complex, and respondents' neutrality may be interpreted as an indication of sensitivity and indecision.

The study also explored the theme of decisional transparency through employee involvement in the decision-making process at the institutional level. On this subject, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they do not regularly participate in the decision-making process at the institution where they work (Figure 4). Only slightly over one-fifth of respondents mentioned that they are very frequently involved, while approximately 73% of them are only occasional-

ly or not at all involved. It is noteworthy that physicians are more involved in the decision-making process compared to nurses (Figure 5), with a percentage of

36% versus 17.1%. Additionally, it was found that the percentage of staff not involved in this process is higher among nurses, with a difference of 10% compared to physicians.

## CONCLUSIONS

The majority of medical staff participating in the study have undergone educational programs on integrity and demonstrate a relatively clear understanding of the term integrity and the significance of ethical and responsible behaviors of both leaders and institution employees alike. However, a third of respondents solely link the integrity of a hospital institution to the correct conduct of its leadership.

Most of the medical personnel in the study have the knowledge to identify signs of corruption in their workplace (60% of respondents seem to be aware of the presence of corruption in the institutions where they work), and nearly half of them evaluate the measures aimed at ensuring an integrity climate within the institution as insufficient.

The study also reveals that certain aspects of institutional integrity (such as meritocracy, fair treatment, and adherence to ethical norms) are universally recognized as important by the majority of respondents, while opinions on other aspects (such as requesting and accepting gifts or reporting acts of corruption) remain divided.

Measures to promote institutional integrity that remain formal, as well as aspects related to varying degrees of intolerance towards different forms of corruption among healthcare workers, are subjects that could constitute themes for future research projects.

## References

1. Elliott KA. Introduction. In: Elliott KA, editor. Corruption and the global economy. Peterson Institute; 1997. p.1-7
2. UN's Anti Corruption Tool Kit, 2001. Disponibil de la: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/corruption/toolkit/toolkitv5.pdf>
3. Glynn EH. Corruption in the health sector: A problem in need of a systems-thinking approach. *Front. Public Health*, 2022. 10:910073.
4. Transparency International. *Corruption Perceptions Index 2022*. Disponibil de la: [https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/Report\\_CPI2022\\_English.pdf](https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/Report_CPI2022_English.pdf)
5. Li Q, An L, Xu J, Balamoune-Lutz M. Corruption costs lives: evidence from a cross-country study. *The European Journal of Health Economics: HEPAC: Health Economics in Prevention and Care*. 2018 Jan;19(1):153-165.
6. Centrul Național Anticorupție. *Raport anual CNA 2022*. Disponibil de la: [https://www.cna.md/public/files/RAPORT\\_CNA\\_2022.pdf](https://www.cna.md/public/files/RAPORT_CNA_2022.pdf)
7. Parlamentul Republicii Moldova. Legea integrității nr.82 din 25.05.2017. Monitorul Oficial Nr. 229-243 art. 360. Disponibil de la: [https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc\\_id=105688&lang=ro](https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=105688&lang=ro)
8. Consiliul European, *Ghidul integrității medicale din Republica Moldova, 2019*. Disponibil de la: <https://rm.coe.int/ghidul-integritatii-medicalerom/16809838b4>