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Residents Report on the Importance of an Undergraduate End of Life Interclerkship

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Background

Does the perceived value of a third year End of Life (EOL) Interclerkship change after medical students complete their first year of residency? Several research studies indicate students’ perceptions about specific learning experiences change after graduating from medical school.

One study found that over 40% of the interns surveyed, recalled having no formal teaching in end-of-life communication, specifically, of how to discuss prognosis, give bad news, or council patient’s families. Respondents reported little direct clinical experience communicating with or caring for dying patients during medical school.

Method

Matched data from three cohorts (n=138) was used to measure changes in medical students’ usefulness ratings of the EOL interclerkship. Ratings were compared over the time period immediately prior to students’ graduation (graduate plans survey is the pre measure) and then subsequent to completion of their first year in a residency program (one year out survey is the post measure). Changes in the average ratings were analyzed two ways, first by a paired samples t-test and second by examining the proportion of “very useful” ratings by using the approximation of the binomial distribution.

Results

Results indicate statistically significant increases in the average usefulness ratings in the combined cohort 2001-2003 (p < .01) and in the individual cohorts of 2002 (p <.05) and 2003 (p < .01). Statistically significant increases (p <.05) were found in the proportion of “very useful” ratings for the combined cohort 2001-2003 (27% to 49%), and in the individual cohorts of 2001 (19% to 50%) and 2003 (31% to 53%). The 2002 cohort had borderline significance (p <.10) (26% to 44%).

Conclusion

The value that medical students put on their education of end of life issues increases after they leave medical school. This finding highlights the importance of teaching end of life issues to undergraduate medical students.