Meeting Students Where They Are: Educating Students with Varying Life Experiences About the Health Care Needs of Persons with Disabilities

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Meeting Students Where They Are: Educating Students with Varying Life Experiences About the Health Care Needs of Persons with Disabilities

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Purpose: Medical students enter preclinical years with varying levels of experience with individuals with disabilities. Previous experience has been shown to have a significant impact on attitudes toward this population and, hence, has the potential to impact patient care (Tervo et al, 2002). This study tested the hypothesis that students can be sensitized to the needs of patients with disabilities through a one-day interclerkship. Students were exposed to nonclinical workshops and credit was given for their participation.

Methodology: Students met with individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities during a series of 2-hour workshops designed to expose students to diverse needs and experiences. Students also viewed a 5-minute film regarding effective methods of communication with and modifications to the clinical encounter for individuals with physical disabilities. Afternoon workshops covered a wide variety of topics such as communication, assistive technologies, socialization, health, community resources and bladder and bowel management. Students reported levels of experience with cognitive/physical, friends, relatives, schoolmates or in college. 136 (77%) students over two years completed pre- and post- interclerkship self-assessments that rated access to health care, family support, community resources, sexuality, and end-of-life care. Students also provided course feedback. Results: There was a highly significant (p<0.01) pre- to post-improvement in all scores on students' self-assessed awareness of healthcare issues. Significant impact was seen for students at all levels of experience. There was an overall trend toward greater improvement among students reporting no previous disability experience was observed. Conclusions: A single-day interclerkship improved the attitudes of students reporting all levels and types of disability experience.

Overview and Background

Since 1995-1996, Interclerkships—short, intense 1-day courses spanning between clerkship to introduce 3rd-year UMass medical students to topics that transcend traditional biomedical curricula which have historically been underrepresented in medical education. Interclerkships emphasize acquisition of knowledge and skills not previously taught in the medical school experience.

The impact of disabilities on patient care represents an area of profound importance to the practice of medicine, yet this topic had been poorly represented in the undergraduate clinical curriculum. A collaboration between the Medical School and the Department of Mental Retardation resulted in an interclerkship addressing common issues faced by patients with disabilities beginning in 2000. Since then, a small committee designed a new curriculum that included, pre- and post-assessment tools. This session discusses the barriers patients with disabilities face accessing healthcare and the benefits of an awareness of healthcare issues. This session will focus on the practical and ethical issues regarding patients with disabilities in both clinical and nonclinical settings. Students will be exposed to a variety of patient testimonials with multiple disabilities on topics such as assistive technologies, socialization, family support, sexuality, and end-of-life care.

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Results

Significant Pre- to Post-improvement in self-assessed attitudes, knowledge, and skills rated by level of experience with cognitive or physical disabilities in friends or family

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<th>Cognitive/Family</th>
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Conclusion: Students self-assessment of their attitudes, knowledge and skills changed significantly (p<0.05) across each pre to post test regardless of their prior level of disability experience or disability type.

Pre- and Post- Interclerkship Assessment Scale

5-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)

- I am aware of what primary care providers need to know when working with people with disabilities.
- I am aware of what primary care providers need to know when working with people with disabilities.
- I know how to access information on resources (such as community services, services for people with disabilities). This would be relevant to patients with disabilities.
- Medical care providers have an impact on the lives of people with disabilities in areas beyond health care.
- Medical care providers have an impact on the lives of people with disabilities in areas beyond health care.
- I know how to modify the clinical encounter when necessary for working with a person with disabilities.
- I know how to modify the clinical encounter when necessary for working with a person with disabilities.
- This experience with individuals with disabilities has improved my own beliefs and behaviors about people with disabilities affect my work with people in the community.
- I am aware of how my own experiences and beliefs about people with disabilities affect my work with people in the community.
- I am aware of how my own experiences and beliefs about people with disabilities affect my work with people in the community.
- I am aware of how my own experiences and beliefs about people with disabilities affect my work with people in the community.

Positive Outcomes and Strong Student Feedback

This single-day interclerkship improved first year medical students' knowledge, attitudes, and skills regarding providing appropriate medical care for disabled patients. 89% of participating students agreed that this interclerkship provided new knowledge and skills that were not covered elsewhere in medical education and 97% agreed that this topic is essential to their training as physicians. Students offered many favorable comments about the experience, excerpted below:

"Excellent, do it again next year, please..."  "Very pertinent and relevant info that is not obtained elsewhere in the curriculum." "I liked the stories about real patients and how different accommodations helped me to work with them." "Good to have patients' experiences. Relevant to future medical practice." "One of the best Interclerkships. Good small groups." "Definitely important to drill through the point of making no assumptions about a person with disabilities, to view their specific (individual) challenges and desires, rather than pigeonhole them into a group. This was overall a GREAT day. thank you..."