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

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Students participated in lectures and numerous small group workshops during this one day Interclerkship. In facilitated small group sessions, medical students with physical or developmental disabilities shared their family's and community thoughts, and the experience of living and working with people who have disabilities. Additionally, a single-day experience in which medical students met with individuals with physical or development disabilities, shared a dialogue about disability experience, and their families and community advocates. Students reported levels of disability experience and confidence in addressing health care needs of people with disabilities, and understanding the challenges that people with disabilities and their families experience when they seek medical care.

Since 1995-1996, Interclerkships—short, intensive 1-day courses implemented during clerkship to introduce 3rd year UMass medical students to subjects that traditional didactic curricula have historically been underrepresented in medical education. Interclerkships emphasize acquisition of new knowledge and skills not previously taught in the medical school experience. The impact of disabilities on medical care clearly represents an area of profound importance to the practice of medicine, yet this topic had been poorly represented in the undergraduate medical curriculum. A new Interclerkship, initiated in 2005-2006, resulted in an Interclerkship addressing cognitive and physical disabilities beginning in AY 2005/2006. This single-day Interclerkship improved third year medical students' self-assessment of their knowledge, attitudes, skills and confidence in addressing people with disabilities, and their potential and administrative resources for people with disabilities. Data from the AY2005/2006 and 2006/2007 programs were presented. They are comparable to the outcomes obtained from the AY2004-2005 Interclerkship.

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 the population and, hence, the potential to impact patient care (Terv et al, 2002). This study evaluated the impact of a single day Interclerkship among students regarding specific components of their attitudes, by level and type of previous disability experience.

Methodology: Students met with individuals with physical or cognitive disabilities and their family members to discuss their unique experiences, needs, successes, and challenges. Students also viewed a short film regarding effective methods of communicating with and modifications to the clinical encounter for individuals with physical disabilities. Additional workshops covered a wide range of material including: assistive technology, special education, disability rights, health, community resources and bladder management. Students reported levels of experience/cognitive/physical friends, relatives, schoolmates and colleagues. Modifying the clinical encounter when necessary for working with a person with disabilities.

Results: Significant Pre- to Post- improvement in self-assessed attitudes, knowledge and skills identified by level of experiences with cognitive or physical disabilities in friends or family.

Pre-Post Improvement in self-assessed attitudes, knowledge and skills identified by level of experiences with cognitive or physical disabilities in friends or family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Pre</th>
<th>Post</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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Conclusion: Students self-assessment of their attitudes, knowledge and skills changed significantly (p < 0.001) in areas of knowledge, skills and confidence in addressing people with disabilities after completing the Interclerkship.

Positive Outcomes and Strong Student Feedback:

The single-day Interclerkship improved third year medical students' self-assessment of their knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to provide appropriate medical care for disabled patients. 89% of participating students agreed that this Interclerkship provided new information that they did not cover 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: "Good to have patients' experiences. Relevant to future medical practice.

Interpersonal skills were enhanced. People with disabilities often encountered situations where they had to negotiate for medical treatment decisions. This session case end of life cases teaching people the importance of communicating with patients and families in a way that is sensitive, ethical, and respectful. (individual) challenges and desires, rather than pigeonhole them. "Good to have good patients' experiences. Relevant to future medical practice.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the individuals and their families and the clinicians who shared their stories with students in this Interclerkship. We are also grateful to the many faculty from UMass Medical School, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, and the Disabled People's Self Help Program who offered workshops and facilitated the small group dialogues between students and patients.