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MEETING CHALLENGES IN CARING FOR PATIENTS WITH DISABILITIES: AN INTERCLERKSHIP COURSE

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Abstract

Purpose: People with disabilities use healthcare services more than those without disabilities, yet healthcare systems often offer these individuals inferior care. Understanding the care of those with physical and cognitive disabilities is critical for appropriate healthcare training and delivery. A one-day Intercellrship introduced third-year medical students to key challenges for physicians who care for disabled patients: (1) limited knowledge and confidence; (2) communication; (3) anticipating secondary medical problems; (4) appropriate medical care in different cultural contexts; (5) medical education; and (6) patient advocacy. The Intercellrship was designed to engage medical students in the challenges of caring for disabled patients, to identify and discuss appropriate medical interventions for those patients, and to improve clinical education and patient advocacy. The Intercellrship was based on an educational model of interactivity that is characteristic of the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMassMed) and was designed to be adaptable to the needs of the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMassMed) and was designed to be adaptable to the needs of the participating medical schools.

Methodology: Essential elements of patient-centered care for disabled individuals were reviewed in a pre-intercellrship. Workshops on physical or development disabilities, their families and their community advocates, discussing healthcare issues and concerns. Other workshops, taught by clinical and community experts, addressed accessibility, the impact of disabilities on medical education, and the advocacy needs of people with disabilities. Students were exposed to real patients and issues that were relevant to the topic. The workshops included discussions about the importance of patient advocacy, the role of the primary care physician in caring for disabled patients, and the importance of patient advocacy.

Results: There was a high level of positive (4-20) (60%) improvement in students' self-assessed knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Students scored concerning medical care for disabled patients (pre: 3.22 (sd=.53); post: 3.99 (sd=.37)). > Students also rated the intercellrship as “very useful clinical info – very useful for providing appropriate medical care for disabled patients.”

Conclusions: A single-day Intercellrship successfully improved third-year medical students' self-assessed knowledge, attitudes, and skills in providing appropriate medical care for disabled patients.

Overview and Background

Since AY1995-1996, Interclerkships—short, intensive 1-day courses interspersed between clerkships—have introduced 3rd-year UMass Medical School students to subjects that frame medical biocultural perspectives. Interclerkships were initially intended to combine basic science, clinical, psychosocial, legal and ethical perspectives on topics historically underrepresented in medical education. Interclerkships emphasize acquisition of new knowledge and skills not previously taught in the medical curriculum. The impact of disabilities on medical care clearly represents an area of profound importance to the practice of medicine that has not been properly represented in the undergraduate medical curriculum. An intercellrship addressing disabilities was launched in AY 2000/2001 and primarily focused on developmental disabilities until a recent collaboration between the Medical School and the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation gave rise to a new, multidisciplinary Intercellrship. Working with real patients (e.g., parents of children with developmental disabilities), students have the opportunity to care for patients with disabilities. Data from the AY 2000/2001 program are presented; they are comparable to the outcomes obtained from the AY2004-2005 Intercellrship.

Working with Patients with Disabilities in the Clinical Setting: Learning Objectives

This Intercellrship will enable students to:
- Approach providing physical and cognitive disabilities in a manner that builds trust and confidence.
- Anticipate potential secondary medical conditions related to a disability and work with patients to maintain their health.
- Modify the clinical encounter when necessary to work with a person with a disability.
- Integrate resources in the community.

Source Description and Evaluation

Students participated in lectures and numerous small group workshops during this one-day Intercellrship. In facilitated small groups, students were paired with individuals with physical or development disabilities and their families. The students interacted with their patients and their families and their community advocates, sharing a dialogue about healthcare issues and concerns. Other workshops, taught by clinical and community experts, addressed accessibility, the impact of disabilities on medical education, and the advocacy needs of people with disabilities. The workshops were designed to engage students in the challenges of caring for disabled patients, to identify and discuss appropriate medical interventions for those patients, and to improve clinical education and patient advocacy. The Intercellrship was based on an educational model of interactivity that is characteristic of the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMassMed) and was designed to be adaptable to the needs of the participating medical schools.

Working with Patients with Disabilities in the Clinical Setting: Course Outcomes

- Students report feeling more comfortable care for patients with disabilities.
- Students rate the Intercellrship as “very useful clinical info – very useful for providing appropriate medical care for disabled patients.”
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Positive Outcomes and Strong Student Feedback

This single-day Intercellrship improved third-year medical students' self-assessed knowledge, attitudes, and skills in providing appropriate medical care for disabled patients. 59% of participating students agreed that this Intercellrship provided new knowledge and skills not covered elsewhere in medical education and 89% agreed that this topic is essential to their training as physicians. Students offered many favorable comments about the experience, including:

- "Great exposure, made me think, please do not change the intercellrship.
- "Great experience.
- "Spinal cord workshop — very USEFUL CLINICAL info — very useful.
- "Very pertinent and relevant info that is not obtained elsewhere in the curriculum.
- "Need the stories about real patients and how different accommodations can help to care with them.
- "Good to have patients' experiences. Relevant to future health care.
- "One of the best intercellrships. Great small groups."
- "Clinically relevant.
- "May help me think through the point of making no accommodations with a person with disabilities. To view their specific disability in the context of disabilities and deficits, rather than pigeonhole them into a group. This was overall a GREAT day, thank you.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the individuals and their families for their participation. We are also grateful to the many faculty from UMass Medical School, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, and from the community who volunteered to participate in this intercellrship. We are also grateful to the many faculty from UMass Medical School, the Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation, and from the community who volunteered to participate in this intercellrship.


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