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The Draw-A-Clock Contest: A Strategy for Improving Cognitive Status Assessment by Trainees

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ABSTRACT
Background: Historically, psychiatrists have been less inclined than neurologists to utilize pencil and paper tasks during bedside cognitive assessments.

Objective: The Draw-A-Clock Contest was established in 1986 at the University of Massachusetts to promote use of cognitive assessment tasks by psychiatry residents.

Methods: Used in neuropsychological assessments since the 1930’s, clock tasks have been popular screening tools for executive function, praxis, visuospatial and constructive ability, often as part of dementia screening. Given its broad utility as a screening tool and the ease and speed of its administration, the Draw-A-Clock task (with hands set to 10 after 11 and no circle provided) was selected for use by UMass psychiatry residents, with further bedside assessment encouraged to explore any detected deficits. To encourage participation and foster clinical inquiry, residents are asked to submit clinically identifying de-identified patient clocks. For 20 years, clock contest entries have been collected each spring, with basic demographic, diagnostic, and process notes. Resident names are encoded, and entries are judged by a neuropsychiatrist (SB) and a neuropsychologist (EK). A “clock trophy” (Fig. 2) and detailed analysis of the submission is presented to the winner at the annual graduation banquet. Examples of winning clock entries and the years they were submitted are presented in Figure 1.

FIGURE ONE: SELECTED WINNING ENTRIES TO DRAW-A-CLOCK CONTEST

FIGURE TWO: DRAW-A-CLOCK AWARDS


Results: As a result of this contest, mental status examinations by trainees have become more comprehensive and an atmosphere of neuropsychiatric inquiry has been maintained. Faculty members have also incorporated this task into their mental status assessments, thus establishing a culture of cognitive inquiry and an academic tradition.

CONCLUSION: The Draw-A-Clock contest helped promote a change in the UMass Psychiatry Residency Program toward a culture of cognitive assessment and neuropsychiatric inquiry in an engaging fashion.

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