“Go See that Patient”: An Examination of the Amount of Unsupervised Time Medical Students Spend with Patients During their First Clinical Year

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Objective

To determine the number of observed patient encounters that third year medical students conduct at an outpatient internal medicine resident clinic.

Background

A review of the literature shows that medical students in the outpatient setting are "being observed performing histories and physical exams in 4% and 6% of encounters respectively" (Carney et al., 2000) with "...little to no feedback about their clinical skills..." (Ferenchick et al., 1997). Because of the variability found in the learning environment, studies have shown that "medical students and residents have deficient skills in interviewing, physical examination, and management of psychosocial issues." (Irby, 1995) A possible strategy for improving medical student education would include getting attending providers and residents to participate more as teachers through direct patient encounter observations and feedback. Through direct observation, "preceptors can provide effective, timely, and specific feedback on observed skills that can be incorporated into subsequent clinical encounters" and "with better supervision of learners, both student skills and clinical care improve." (Hanson et al., 2010)

Methods

A paper questionnaire was created that third year medical students rotating through the Lehigh Valley Physicians Practice (LVPP) were asked to voluntarily and anonymously complete. The questionnaire asked the following: date of patient encounter, time the patient encounter began, the time the patient encounter ended, did you use this encounter as a part of your required mini CEX?, during which of the following portions of your encounter with the patient were you observed: Interview, Physical Exam, Counseling the patient at the end of the visit?, were you shown how to improve your skills in any of these areas?, were you given timely and instructive feedback?, and If you answered "yes" to any of the above what did you learn to do differently or better? Students were asked to submit completed forms in a sealed box and all data was entered into Microsoft Excel.

Results

53 questionnaires were completed. 39 (73.6%) third year medical student encounters were directly observed at the LVPP clinic. Of these observed 39 encounters, medical students stated that 25 (64.1%) of these observed experiences were of their patient interview, 24 (61.5%) were of their physical examination, and 16 (41.0%) were of them giving patient counseling. 6 (15.4%) observed encounters were filled out and submitted to their third year clerkship as their mandated mini-CEX. In 25 (64.1%) encounters, students did not receive instruction on how to improve their clinical skills such as their patient interview, physical examination or how to provide patient counseling, and in 22 (56.4%) encounters students did not receive instructive feedback.

Table 1: What Third Year Medical Students Learned During Their Observed Patient Encounters at Lehigh Valley Physicians Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Examination Skills</th>
<th>Disease Management</th>
<th>Skills Instruction and Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Neuro exam&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Management of DM&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Improving direct questions, making a plan&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Pulm exam&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Management of HTN&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Expanding differential diagnosis&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Review of PE techniques for lice hygiene&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Management of skin&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Better focus on questioning in room, better organization and presentation&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Shoulder Exam&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Musculoskeletal management&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;I learned how to ask questions&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Administered Medical Student Questionnaire

Figure 2: Revised Medical Student Questionnaire

Figure 3: The Number of Observed Third Year Medical Student Encounters at the Lehigh Valley Physicians Practice

Figure 4: The Number of Third Year Medical Student Encounters Where They Were Shown How to Improve Their Skills vs. The Number of Encounters Where They Were Given Instructive, Timely Feedback

Conclusion

Contrary to the existing literature, 73.6% of patient encounters were observed by a resident or attending physician. Unlike the existing literature, third year medical students at LVPP received feedback and instruction on how to improve their clinical skills a majority of the time. This potentially represents an opportunity for residents and attendings to get more involved in the educational curriculum to ensure that students receive feedback on a regular basis and ultimately improving patient care. Yet, we acknowledge that the data in this study may not be sufficient due to the limited number of patient encounters. In the future, we recommend gathering more encounters to validate the results.

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