Title: Increasing student motivation in Argentinean students through early clinical experience

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The context and setting

The School of Medicine, National University of Tucumán, similar to many Argentinean medical schools, consists of a preclinical phase during which basic sciences are studied in classrooms and laboratories away from hospitals and patient contact. Most basic science teachers have no contact with the clinical setting, which increases the division between the teaching of basic sciences and the subsequent clinical education.

Why the idea or change was necessary

The typical 17-18 year old student who enters medical school in Argentina has no clear vision of the career he or she has chosen and no actual experience until completing two years of medical school. This situation generates a lack of motivation to study the individual preclinical phase subjects and, in addition, does not foster integrated learning and thinking. The aims of this project were to: increase student motivation; offer a vision of the medical profession from the very first stage of medical school; provide a practical use for the basic science subjects in order to support a more integrated type of learning; and promote the doctor-patient relationship through encouraging adequate behaviors and attitudes and detecting any difficulties.

What was done

A core faculty work group was constituted with six medical doctors, chemists, and biologists, who participated in the design of the logic model for the curriculum project, the basic and clinical content and the psychological effects and the values involved of the first year student-patient interactions.
The group designed an optional course for first year students in their second semester, consisting of six classes of three hours each twice a week at the main University Hospital. Fifty of 200 students participated. Each class was divided into: introductory module with a brief lecture of integrated contents and practical exercises of clinical skills; practice activity involving direct contact with patients and members of the hospital staff; and evaluation. This included student feedback consisting of 5-point Likert scale and open-ended questions to evaluate different aspects of the experience. Patients' surveys and evaluation meetings for teachers and senior medical students (who helped in the course implementation) also provided rich evaluation information.

Evaluation of the results and impact

The student self-report feedback after the optional course revealed high score (> 4.4 out of 5) for motivation to study the basic sciences and satisfaction with the medical school curriculum, as well as confidence with patients, understanding the social and psychological determinants that influence health and disease, and satisfaction with career choice. The self-reports on communication and empathy skills with patients were lower and more varied (3.9 with range of 1-5 points). These results suggest that some first year students may experience anxiety in facing patients or inconveniencing patients, suggesting more patient contact may be necessary to increase confidence. The results support the concept that it is possible to provide first year students with a vision of the medical profession through early clinical experience, promote medical student self-awareness and positive attitudes towards ill people, increase their confidence, motivate them to study basic sciences, and help them to develop their professional identities.

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