

Title: Elective rheumatology program with a primary health care focus

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Context and Setting: Rheumatic conditions are very common in primary care. However, most general practitioners do not have the required expertise to deal with the rheumatic diseases they are likely to encounter in clinical practice. This fact reflects the poor undergraduate rheumatology curriculum in the majority of medical schools, where the teaching of rheumatology is developed mainly in hospital settings (tertiary care) by using traditional methods. Student-selected component (SSC), an innovative teaching method, is an optional program within the medical curriculum first used in the UK. Its specific aims include the development of students' skills in self-directed learning, the ability to study areas outside the core curriculum in depth, and development of confidence in their own skills and abilities.

Why the idea was necessary: Rheumatology is a mandatory discipline, with 60 hours devoted to it during the 4th year of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN) regular curriculum, but it is totally developed at the university hospital. Thus, the objective of this pilot study was the implementation of SSC in a traditional curriculum to develop rheumatology skills related to primary care.

What was done: Twelve medical students in the clerkship (5th and 6th year) electively participated in this SSC program, which consisted of ten 3-hour weekly sessions, from April to June 2009. The activities developed were the following (S = Session):

S 1 - Introduction to module and setting of goals. Use web-based scientific material to highlight the importance of rheumatological primary care

S 2 - Students interviewed general practitioners from the "Family Health Program" (primary care level) on more prevalent rheumatic diseases in the community and access to diagnostic and therapeutic methods

S 3 - Small groups of clinical cases discussions on osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis

S 4 - Small groups of clinical cases discussions on low back pain and shoulder pain

Note: Pre-class review of the topics were required, both for S 3 and 4

S 5 - A physiotherapist and a psychologist discussed their roles in dealing with patients with long-term chronic pain and debilitating conditions

S 6 and 7 - Primary care of rheumatic patients by students, with supervision of rheumatologists

S 8 - Written assessment (short-answer questions)

S 9 - Practical assessment (OSCE with standardized patients)

S 10 - Feedback session and program evaluation (semi-structured interview)

Evaluation of results and impact: All of the students achieved good performance on assessments (grade 8 or above, in a scale ranging from 0 to 10). After completing the program, students surveyed (12/12) stated their confidence for diagnosing and treating rheumatic disease had improved either greatly (90%) or somewhat (10%). Students unanimously indicated that active formats were preferred over lectures and that practical training in Rheumatology primary care was a very rich experience.

In conclusion, this study showed that SSC was an effective learning strategy for development of Rheumatology skills and abilities in undergraduate medical students. These observations deserve further study with a larger number of participants and a comparison of results with a control group of clerkship students.