

Title: Introduction of peer assisted learning scheme (PALS) in microbiology

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What problem was addressed: Studies conducted in the past designed to identify learning approaches in microbiology had shown that many students preferred a superficial approach which they adopted only for passing examinations. It was hypothesized that the introduction of peer assisted learning would help students build their understanding of microbiology concepts and encourage deep learning by working together with peers posted in clinical departments. With these objectives in mind, we decided to introduce a systematic and workable Peer Assisted Learning Scheme (PALS) in microbiology.

What was tried: Cross tutoring was practiced for PALS. Students in the 5th semester, who had completed their microbiology training and posted in clinical departments, functioned as peer facilitators for 3rd semester students. Twenty peer facilitators were selected. They attended a workshop and received guidelines for peer tutoring activities. After conducting PALS, each participating student completed a questionnaire related to their experience during PALS. Facilitators were also provided with a questionnaire that helped them reflect on PALS sessions they tutored. Focus group discussions were conducted with peer trainees, facilitators and faculty.

What lessons were learned: Besides helping them understand basic concepts and remember factual information, students enrolled for PALS mentioned that they enjoyed the learning experience during PALS. Students who were academically at risk opined that PALS helped them avoid the stigma associated with remedial classes. They found that these sessions provided them an opportunity to clarify complex concepts with PALS facilitators. However few students voiced concern over the structure and conduct of PALS.

Peer facilitators mentioned that they benefitted from reviewing microbiology course materials during PALS process. Revisiting concepts during their clinical rotations helped them integrate microbiology with clinical medicine. Facilitators also commented that PALS had contributed to their personal development.

Faculty discovered that it was possible to train a group of students as peer tutors with facilitation skills necessary to conduct teaching learning activities in microbiology.

Our experiences indicate that peer assisted learning ensures the provision of a non- threatening, student focused learning environment. While it has been decided to sustain PALS in microbiology, introduction of this scheme in other departments is being considered.

Reference

Ross MT, Cameron HS. Peer assisted learning: a planning and implementation framework: AMEE Guide no. 30. Med Teach 2007; 29(6):527-45