BRIEF COMMUNICATION

NURTURING PROFESSIONALISM THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH COMMUNITY PROJECT

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Abstract

Medical professionalism is now more crucial than ever. Recently, more and more misconduct among doctors widely portrayed and unashamedly publicized by the popular press. Medical Schools in Malaysia are working hard to rectify their weaknesses so that their products are competent and professional doctors. Cyberjaya University College of Medical Sciences (CUCMS) certainly views this matter seriously and has incorporated professionalism training or as we call it Affective Domain Training into the curriculum implemented in all phases of the medical education. An example is the innovative inclusion of Community Project in the curriculum of undergraduate psychiatry. Although it started off with wanting to get students involved in creating awareness amongst the public about mental illness, but through it, students attained exposure in leadership, teamwork and communication skills as well as what it means to be altruistic, to work under stress, to be empathic and many more. The students themselves enjoyed it. Although the down side includes extra time, money and manpower, it can be safely concluded that having a community project in psychiatry undergraduate curriculum or other specialties for that matter could be an innovative and enjoyable way to nurture medical professionalism.

Keywords: professionalism, mental health, medical education.

Introduction:

The concept of professionalism is not a modern one. In fact, the word can be traced back to the times of the Roman when a physician named Scribonius used it to refer to “a commitment to compassion or clemency in the relief of sufferings (1). It means that, while the society rewards the medical professions by awarding it financial remuneration, prestige and status, relatively
autonomous practice and the freedom to self-regulate, in return society expects the members of the profession to be altruistic, demonstrate honesty and integrity, competent and benevolence (2). While some of the less significant content of this societal contract has changed, the major ones remain the same.

The task of training medicine and thus professionalism has now fallen into the hands of medical schools and universities. While in the past the teaching of professionalism to medical students relied solely on replicating the behaviours of their teachers, it is now universally agreed that this is inadequate (3). In America, the single most common cause for disciplinary action against medical students, house officers and practitioners is unprofessional conduct (4). As a result, leading medical organisations in America has included professionalism as one of the areas of competency in its medical curriculum (Table 1). This phenomenon is not only confined to the United States of America. It is also true elsewhere around the globe and Malaysia is not excluded.

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Table 1: Description of Professionalism from the Association of American Medical Colleges and National Board of Medical Examiners (5).
The Cyberjaya University College of Medical Sciences (CUCMS) in Selangor, Malaysia takes the teaching of medical professionalism very seriously. This is reflected through its philosophy (figure 1) and curriculum. In its medical curriculum, professional attributes are nurtured through the Affective Domain Training and Assessments, which goes hand in hand with the other domains of cognitive (knowledge) and psychomotor (clinical skills) (figure 2). The nine outcomes of this domain are spelt out by the mnemonic “Just Noble CUCMS DR” (figure 3) (5).

“\text{To harness human potential in a comprehensive manner to produce holistic health care providers who are intellectually-, emotionally- and spiritually-balanced based on the principles of Islam and the obedience to the Almighty Allah}”

Figure 1: The philosophy of CUCMS

Figure 2: Three Domains of Education

Figure 3: CUCMS Learning Outcomes
For two years running, the Department of Psychiatry in the Faculty of Medicine, CUCMS has dedicated a session for community project in its Mental Health, General and Military Psychiatry Posting. Designed at first to involve fourth year medical students in creating awareness in the Malaysian public on mental health and de-stigmatize mental illness, its value in nurturing professionalism abreast with the university’s Affective Domain curriculum has only recently surfaced and understood. In this paper, the authors will demonstrate how a community project in mental health posting can be used to train students in aspects of professionalism.

**Method**

At the beginning of the posting the students are briefed on the community project and what is expected of them. The students will then elect the project leader among them and delegate the rest of the work together. The time to hold the event as well as the preparation sessions is time-tabled. The objective of the project is to create awareness amongst the public on the importance of mental health and to de-stigmatize mental illness. However, the students will then choose what topics to focus on and the themes. Past topics have been on stress, depression and others. The venues are usually suggested by the lecturer, but then the students will have to liaise with personnel at the site themselves including sometimes going to the local authority. In the past, we have done projects in army camps, a Community Hall and during the recent F1 Sepang International Circuit. The lecturer as supervisor will only play a facilitator role. The students will do everything themselves.

What aspects of professionalism are being addressed here? As individual, we hope to instil the values of altruism by taking part in the community project, honesty and integrity in interacting with the public, and having good communication skills both with medical personnel and the members of the community at large. As a group, their teamworking skills are tested, leadership ability is polished and again communication skills being refined. Although we have allocated a sum of money for the project, the students are encouraged to sharpen their entrepreneurial skills to come up with additional funds.
Feedback

In the two years running the programme, all of the students group have enjoyed the activity. They felt that they have contributed something to the community, learnt how difficult it is to communicate to laypeople that came from different background, understood how important it is to work as an organized group and their ability to manage their finances were put to the test. On the other hand, they were able to now appreciate better how much stigma is associated with mental illness and the denial our community exhibited to the aspect of mental health.

Feedback from the community has also been very encouraging. Participants from most of the sites found the programme helpful in updating them with issues regarding mental health and stress management. And all of them would welcome the same project to be conducted again at their sites.

Conclusion

Although having a community project in an undergraduate medical course is an innovation, from our experience, it is a valuable instrument in nurturing the very important aspect of professionalism in the curriculum. Feedback obtained from the students is positive, in which students liked the activity and it had been beneficial for them. It may need more refining to make it a more worthwhile addition to the undergraduate medical curriculum.

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