



Fostering Resilience in Medical Students: The Role of Physician Health Programs

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Abstract

The Coalition on Physician Education in Substance Use Disorders, LLC (COPE) is a voluntary organization devoted to improving patient care and the public health by assuring that all physicians are trained to prevent, identify, and provide specialty-appropriate interventions for patients who use tobacco or illicit drugs, or who engage in unhealthy use of alcohol or non-medical use of prescription medications.

COPE is engaged in a new initiative to provide medical schools with valuable resources for the prevention and identification of, and effective interventions for, medical students who are at risk for or experiencing problems with alcohol, drug, or tobacco use disorders and/or related mental problems, thus building and/or restoring their overall health and resilience.

Methods

COPE conducts a nationwide survey of medical school curricula in an effort to identify the current state of teaching about SUDs at U.S. medical schools and to gather information on resource needs, teaching strategies and programs that may be helpful to all medical schools. As of May 2015, 60 medical schools have completed the survey.

Among other results, the study showed that fewer than half (43%) of the responding schools report having a program in place to identify, intervene with, and provide assistance to medical students who are at risk for or experiencing substance use and/or related mental disorders.

Extent of the Problem

A study published in the February 2015 issue of Workplace Health & Safety found that 25% of medical students surveyed reported current nonmedical use of drugs, while 11% reported risky use of alcohol (Gignon, Havet et al., 2015). Similar figures have been reported in other studies

There are no separate protocols outlined by the Federation of Physician Health Program to address emotional or substance use problems identified in the student during medical school. However, these programs have been helpful to students in a way similar to the rest of the medical community allowing for an anonymous assessment, referral to treatment and ongoing monitoring. This allows for the continuation of their studies while in compliance. These programs establish a safety net in which the student can come forth without the fear of losing the opportunity to continue their medical studies and many times complete their education and become healthy practicing physicians.

In response to these data, COPE is undertaking an initiative with the network of state Physician Health Programs (PHPs), whose staff are recognized by state medical licensing boards, other regulatory agencies, and medical organizations as experts on the prevention and identification of, and treatment for, substance abuse and related mental disorders in medical personnel.

References

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Objectives

1. Increase faculty and administrator awareness of the potential for medical students to have, or develop, substance use and related mental disorders.
2. Discuss the resources to address these issues that are available at no cost through state Physician Health Programs (PHPs).
3. Describe the COPE initiative to facilitate linkages between medical schools and their state's Physician Health Program.
4. Engage viewers in a discussion of whether and how their medical school could create a linkage with the state Physician Health Program.
5. Extend an invitation to join the Student Resilience Initiative as contributors and evaluators.

Conclusion

The goal of the Student Resilience Initiative is to facilitate the development of linkages between medical schools and their state's Physician Health Program (PHPs). COPE also is developing educational materials to help medical students understand the risk factors for SUDs and related mental disorders in themselves and their peers, as well as the types of confidential assistance available through their state's PHP.

The Student Resilience Initiative spans ethical, legal and liability issues, and offers the resources to help medical schools build resilience among their students. Study of the adoption and subsequent efficacy of the initiative is underway.