A Novel Approach to Medical Education: Meeting the Needs in Global Health through the Integration of Social Medicine in the Training and Education of Healthcare Professionals

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Medical practice in today’s globalized society requires that medical students graduate and transition to residency programs and the workforce with appropriate training in addressing health disparities in the context of the diverse cultural, racial and ethnic makeup of the United States. The predominantly socially-neutral biomedical curricula of medical institutions lack an adequate integration of social medicine into the training of future physicians. Furthermore the widespread deficit of interdisciplinary education that is a fundamental component of the field of social medicine is a consequence apparent in the increasing need for collaboration between physicians and other health professionals. Addressing modern-day issues in medical care requires the education and training of competent professionals across healthcare disciplines who understand social contexts that impact health, disease and the practice of medicine. Modern medicine additionally requires training young health professionals to understand the political and structural determinants of health.

A healthier society begins in the classroom when the social determinants of health are a pillar of medical education, alongside biological sciences, physiological sciences, and clinical skills training.1

OBJECTIVES
Our team traveled to Haiti and participated in the 2018 cohort of the EqualHealth Social Medicine Course, Beyond the Biological Basis of Disease. Our primary objective is to demonstrate and promote our novel and replicable approach of integrating Social Medicine into the training of young health professionals. By bringing awareness to social, political, and structural aspects often glossed over in predominantly socially-neutral biomedical curricula. EqualHealth trains participants to appreciate the applicability of Social Medicine. This methodology is grounded in pedagogical theory and is a model of education that promotes the advancement of the continuously changing and diverse medical school curricula in the United States. Such a learning environment can be adapted to advance a student’s understanding of the interactions between “the biology of disease and the social, cultural, economic, political, and historical factors that influence illness presentation and social experience”.2

INNOVATIVE APPROACH
Student Ethnicities: Haitian, Ethiopian, Ivorian, Rwandan, Mexican, and American
Student Backgrounds: Osteopathic and Allopathic Medicine, Nursing, Midwifery, Public health, Political Science
Course Focus: Linking modern medicine with the principles of Social Medicine.
Activities: Field visits, group reflections, bedside teachings, classroom-based presentations and discussions on socio-political determinants of health

Modern-day technology allows classrooms in one country to connect remotely with counterparts abroad, thus enabling social medicine education to be offered virtually and across borders. The study of Social Medicine exposes students across healthcare disciplines to collaborative approaches that respect the dignity of the poor while empowering marginalized and impoverished communities to effectively address their identified concerns and needs.

ACGME & CME recognize the benefits of Social Medicine.

CHALLENGE

RESULTS & IMPACT

If there is inadequate respect for the standards of local communities, medical missions and volunteering trips can do more harm than good for those receiving services. In fact, although the aim is to provide unlicensed medical students with a genuine medical experience, these trips become a missed opportunity for students and professionals from abroad to reinforce the local medical infrastructure of impoverished or underserved communities. These trips tend to utilize citizens of those countries as props to enrich the traveling student’s experience. This approach highlights the typical, although unintentional practice of “dottle bag medicine.” Social Medicine acts as a powerful force to refine this widespread practice. The EqualHealth Social Medicine Course successfully addresses this problem by creating peer connections across geopolitical boundaries to address social, political, and structural determinants of health.

Social Medicine pedagogy increases awareness of pertinent issues in health inequity as identified by a community and its key stakeholders. This suggested alternative approach to integrating Social Medicine in the curricula of American medical schools will increase compassion in medical practice, as well as provide a unique outlook on collaboration between international medical student counterparts and other healthcare disciplines across geopolitical boundaries.

REFERENCES