



Poster: Transformative learning in public health – Using a ‘Dragon’s Den’ approach.

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Abstract

All medical graduates should have an appreciation of the importance and scope of public health and the potential roles that they can play in improving health in communities. Using the ‘Dragon’s Den’ approach, with each student researching and presenting a programme to improve health for a population they have selected, has proved a popular teaching method. It has encouraged students to think about public health issues in the United Kingdom and globally. It is transformative in the sense that it has taken them away from the bedside and encouraged them to devise plans to work with other professionals, government, law makers and non-governmental agencies to find ways of improving population health and reducing health inequalities. Their proposals are usually based on evidence based programmes which they have identified in the British and international medical literature. Making an articulate, illustrated short ‘pitch’ has also enhanced their presentation skills.

Keywords: Public health; medical education; ‘Dragon’s den’

Commentary

Our poster gave general details of an approach that we have used successfully at St George’s for ten years. We consider it transformative in the sense that it encourages medical students to think about the wider issues of health and disease and not just the patient that they see in hospital or the community. Students see that death, disease and disability are not caused or treated solely by medical and nursing services but that there are environmental, social, political and economic factors, many of which the individual has little control over, which can cause ill health and delay recovery. This important perspective has been reinforced by the General Medical Council (GMC) requirement to teach on health inequalities and also an increasing national student interest in global health.

In 2010 the Royal College of Physicians report on ‘Future Physicians’ stated:

‘All doctors should think in terms of health promotion and disease and disability prevention as part of their daily routine. That is not to say that all doctors should be required to see themselves as public health specialists, at least not in the formal sense, but all doctors should consider themselves ‘societal doctors’ with responsibilities beyond the health of the individual patient.’

At St George’s we have a two week Public Health ‘Firm’ in the Final Year. There are around 40 students in each of the six firms we teach throughout the year. As students are near the end of their undergraduate medical training they have a wide range of medical and surgical experience and we feel are better prepared to study and discuss the wider issues of health and health care. An initial introductory talk suggests that the marked increase in life

expectancy that we have seen in high income countries is due by over 90% to improvements in sanitation, diet, immunisation and family planning rather than medical interventions in established disease. The challenge is also posed as to how we could bring these improvements to low and middle income countries. We also face the continuing challenges in high income countries of reducing the adverse effects of smoking, excess alcohol, obesity and limited exercise.

One transformational approach that we have used, is to get individual students to prepare and give a Dragon's Den presentation on a public health topic which they select. Our poster outlines the five key aspects of a Dragon's Den presentation and we emphasise the importance of using correctly the wealth of information that is available, usually on line, to quantify health problems and also tackle them with an evidence-based approach. These skills are vital if doctors are to be equipped to take on leadership roles within the National Health Service, government departments and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). On a smaller scale they are also relevant to the current approach using Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to plan and implement health service care and also work with local government to tackle important health issues.

The main topics that students examined in the twelve month academic session (2016-17) were obesity, road traffic accidents, suicide, smoking, maternal health, HIV and alcohol misuse. All of these require multi-agency services for effective prevention and treatment.

Many students choose a topic related to the country where they plan to spend their student elective (undertaken after Final examinations) and the country profiles that they prepare for this work can be used in their elective reports. The countries that students examined were the United Kingdom (over a third stayed local for electives) and also, often reflecting student backgrounds, India, Pakistan, the United States and Australia. Countries where students planned to do their student electives included South Africa, Vietnam, Malaysia, Nepal and Hong Kong. In total presentations concerning 35 countries were given. Students are given over 30 hours during the term to prepare their 'pitches' which they present in groups of 6 – 8 students with a tutor sitting in for assessment and discussion. Student feedback is very positive. As many countries improve their preventive and health care services finding obvious topics to choose is becoming more challenging. However, good health data shows differences between many countries and the challenge is to raise all to a better level. This is done against a background of many countries experiencing internal conflict, lack of resources, sometimes strict religious laws, social practices and customs and occasionally problems with corruption. The practicalities of Dragon's Den solutions is discussed with these in mind emphasising that medicine is both an art and a science.

Each year a small number of students seek our advice on how they can combine training both clinically and in public health so that they can provide care from an individual and population perspective. We feel that such doctors will have a transformative influence both for their medical and surgical specialties and also the National Health Service or wherever they choose to work.

Reference

Royal College of Physicians (2010) Future Physician - Changing doctors in changing times. Report of a Working Group. RCP. London. Para 3.11. P 28. (Accessible on line as a PDF).