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Special Study Modules on Plastic Surgery in the Undergraduate Curriculum – A Medical Student Perspective

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Abstract:

This article explores how Special Study Modules (SSMs) can allow medical students with an interest in Plastic Surgery to engage with the specialty. An SSM in Plastic Surgery is designed, and feedback is received from 13 third-year medical students who participated in the pilot.

Key Words:

Medical School Curriculum; Medical Student; Plastic Surgery; SSM

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Revisions of the medical school curriculum have resulted in Plastic Surgery occupying a 'near-negligible' portion of the curricula in several medical schools with only 16.5% medical school curricula offering compulsory Plastic Surgery teaching in 2013 compared to 78% in 1986.^{1,2} Studies have shown that career choices of medical students are strongly influenced by experiences in medical school.³ Therefore, to optimise the future sustainability of this specialty, innovative methodologies in fostering medical student engagement must be explored.⁴

The use of Special Study Modules (SSMs) is an effective method of improving engagement with medical students. This view is explored by Siraj et al in their cross-sectional study evaluating the SSM experiences of both students and alumni of a medical school. Ninety percent of respondents in both groups felt the modules were enriching and 80-90% felt that the SSM experience was pleasant. Half of respondents believed that the SSMs contributed towards level of interest in the proposed specialty.⁵

The senior author (MAAK) designed a Plastic Surgery SSM during his postgraduate degree to mitigate this growing negligence of the specialty in the curricula. A pilot study involving 13 third year students was conducted with the SSM consisting of

a balance between clinical, practical and theoretical aspects of Plastic Surgery. SSM students were provided with a four-component induction pack at the start of the SSM placement. The first three components consisted of a Departmental Handbook (a simplified version of the handbook provided to rotating junior trainees in the department to enable understanding of departmental processes), a SSM Rotation Plan/Calendar (with assigned clinical/academic commitments improving attendance and promoting better student involvement) and a list of 'Key Topics in Plastic Surgery' (e.g., skin cancer guidelines, lower limb trauma guidelines etc) that was explored and understood in the course of the SSM (by being mapped to clinical cases/clinical commitments). The fourth component consisted of a guideline for formative and summative assessment of the module to enable successful completion of the SSM. The formative assessments during the SSM included student-led teaching sessions, regular journal clubs to improve principles of evidence-based medicine and written case-based assignments to increase depth of knowledge of the specialty. This was supplemented with an 'end-of-SSM' marked quiz to gain an objective mark for the theoretical learning during the SSM to tick the summative assessment box. Furthermore, feedback assessment tools were provided to tailor the

teaching, so that students can maximise their educational experience.

The clinical and practical component of the SSM was similarly designed with components to address SSM student needs. Ward rounds involving SSM students was organised to allow greater bedside teaching while enabling medical students to appreciate the attention to detail in planning the care of the Plastic Surgery in-patient (especially one that has undergone a complex reconstruction). Attendance in clinics started off with observation and step-by-step escalation of involvement into history taking, examination, diagnosis and management planning. Attending dressing clinics with nursing staff and hand therapy clinics with physiotherapists were often a great resource for medical students to appreciate the benefits of the multidisciplinary team approach. Similarly, gradual escalation of operating theatre involvement, from observation to active assisting became a positive exercise in improving medical student confidence in the operative setting and in improving their exposure to the reconstructive aspect of Plastic Surgery. During the SSM, the Plastic Surgery team members were instructed to make themselves available to students for advice, teaching and mentoring.

This integrative process was established to widen the scope for students and strengthen the student-mentor relationship, thus increasing the likelihood of the student committing to the specialty. The overall feedback received from the students was positive with most students strongly agreeing that the SSM provided a good learning experience and inspired consideration to pursuing a career in Plastic Surgery.

The involvement of the Plastic Surgery fraternity in collaborating with medical schools to design and implement a structured and standardised SSM in Plastic Surgery shall be a positive step towards changing the perceptions of students, medical schools and government institutions towards our specialty. This collaboration can also involve various national, Plastic Surgery based institutions who can also help motivate, educate and encourage medical students to consider a career in Plastic Surgery by using their platforms. These alliances shall go a long way towards improving the representation of Plastic Surgery within the compulsory component in the undergraduate curriculum and by helping to recruiting quality torch bearers to our profession; it shall help towards safeguarding the future of our versatile speciality.

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