International Journal of Clinical Skills

A Peer Reviewed International Journal for the Advancement of Clinical Skills
- ‘docendo ac discendo’ - ‘by teaching and learning’

In this issue:

Does first aid have a place in the medical curriculum? A survey of medical students

Patients’ attitudes to medical student presence within a university hospital setting

Flexor digitorum superficialis absence in the small finger: a tip on screening
Foreword


When a medical emergency occurs in the pre-hospital environment, there might be an expectation from the general public for medical students to offer assistance with a similar level of competence as qualified doctors. However, the question is raised; do medical students have sufficient training in first aid skills to fulfil the role expected of them? Our colleagues at Queens University Belfast and Ulster Hospital, Northern Ireland, questioned over 500 medical students to identify knowledge of, and attitudes towards, first aid.

Researchers from Oxford University and Brighton & Sussex Medical School, United Kingdom, conduct a research study to identify patients’ attitudes towards the presence of medical students within both inpatient and outpatient hospital settings. Does the involvement of medical students have a negative impact on patient satisfaction? Are patients comfortable being examined by medical students? Are patients aware of their right to refuse students’ presence? Find out what the evidence shows.

Mr Lyndon Mason, University Hospital of Wales, United Kingdom, provides information on a screening tip for assessing the absence of flexor digitorum superficialis. This interesting technique illustrates the quadriga effect.

This issue also includes a review of Muhammed Akunjee et al’s book ‘Clinical Skills Explained’. This book aims to explain essential clinical skills and associated rationale, structured into the three main themes of history taking, physical examination and procedures. Tracey Gregory (Lead Consultation Skills Trainer, University of Leicester, United Kingdom) gives her expert analysis of what the book provides for its readers.

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Contents

The Executive Board Members 1
Foreword 1
The Editorial Board 2

Original Research

Does first aid have a place in the medical curriculum? A survey of medical students
- Rebecca Gibson 3

Patients’ attitudes to medical student presence within a university hospital setting
- Nicola Read 8

Review

Flexor digitorum superficialis absence in the small finger: a tip on screening
- Lyndon Mason 14

Book Review 16
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Does first aid have a place in the medical curriculum? A survey of medical students

Abstract

Introduction: When a medical emergency occurs in the pre-hospital environment, there is an expectation from the general public for medical students to offer assistance with a similar level of competence as qualified doctors. However, the question is raised; do medical students have sufficient training in first aid skills to fulfil the role expected of them?

Prior to the publication of the latest version of Tomorrow’s Doctors by the UK General Medical Council, a student selected component (SSC) in first aid was delivered at the medical school in Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Northern Ireland. The overwhelming popularity of this SSC prompted a desire to investigate and understand students’ experiences of first aid.

Aim: To identify first and second year medical students’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards, first aid and their expectations of the medical curriculum.

Methods: A questionnaire was delivered using TurningPoint Audience Response System® during the second semester of the 2008 - 2009 academic year to all first and second year medical students at QUB.

Results: Less than half of the students felt that they had a good level of first aid knowledge, a third would feel confident helping in an emergency and only 10% would be confident leading an emergency situation. The vast majority of students believed first aid is beneficial, that the general public expect medical students to have the knowledge to handle an emergency situation, and that a full first aid course should be included in the core medical curriculum at an early stage. They did not believe it should be a pre-requisite for medical school.

Conclusion: Only a small proportion believed their first aid knowledge adequate. An overwhelming proportion believed that first aid training is beneficial and that the public expect competency in managing emergencies. This study clearly demonstrates students’ need and desire for first aid training in the core medical curriculum at an early stage and to the highest training level possible.

Introduction

When a medical emergency occurs in the pre-hospital environment, there is an expectation from the general public for doctors to offer assistance and to have the appropriate skills to manage the situation [1, 2]. There are numerous anecdotal reports of medical students also being called upon at pre-hospital emergencies with a similar expectation of obligation and competence [3 – 8]. However, the question is raised: do medical students have sufficient training in first aid skills to fulfil adequately the role expected of them?
In a survey of UK medical schools only a small proportion offered first aid training to their students [9, 10]. In the latest version of the UK General Medical Council’s *Tomorrow’s Doctors*, it has been acknowledged for the first time that medical students should be trained in providing “basic first aid” [11].

Prior to the publication of this latest version of *Tomorrow’s Doctors*, a student selected component (SSC) in first aid was delivered at the medical school in Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Northern Ireland. The overwhelming popularity of this SSC prompted a desire to investigate and understand medical students’ experiences of first aid.

**Aim**

The aims of this study were to identify first and second year medical students’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards, first aid and their expectations of the medical curriculum.

**Method**

Following a literature review, a working group developed a questionnaire to explore the aims of this study. The questionnaire was structured into three categories – the demographics, the extent of students’ knowledge of first aid, and lastly, students’ attitudes towards first aid and their expectations of the medical school’s curriculum.

The survey was conducted during the second semester of the 2008 - 2009 academic year at QUB. The university offers a five year medical degree programme comprised mostly of undergraduate entry. All first and second year medical students were invited to participate; there were 528 eligible students. The questionnaire was limited to years one and two as it was easier to deliver the questionnaire to the pre-clinical years, and we wanted the opinions of those who had not yet entered clinical training.

The questionnaire was delivered at the start of a practical skills teaching session. For these sessions, each year is divided into four groups of approximately 60 students per group. The same teaching session is run on four afternoons over a two week period, with each group attending once. As the questionnaire had to be delivered to each of the four groups for each year, it was conducted eight times in total over a two week period. We believed a randomly selected sample could be misrepresentative of the two years’ opinions, and that the alternative available methods of delivering the questionnaire and collecting data, when only a proportion of the students are invited to participate, could lower the response rate and introduce bias (as certain people may be more likely to respond than others). In this regard, the whole cohort of 528 students was invited to participate.

The questionnaire was delivered using TurningPoint Audience Response System®: responses were yes/no answers, choosing an option from a numbered list or using the Likert scale provided; i.e. no free responses were possible. The results were analysed using simple descriptive analysis.

Due to the varied number of responses between questions, statistics have been calculated as a percentage of those students responding to that particular question, as we do not know if this variation was due to students not wishing to respond, failed use of handsets or hardware/software malfunction. Raw data is included to aid interpretation.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Queen’s University Belfast Ethics Committee (Reference 08/29).

**Results**

**Response rate**

All 528 medical students from the first and second years were invited to participate: 477 students responded (90.3% response rate). Students were not obliged to answer every question: the number of responses per question ranged from 426 to 477, with an average of 469 responses per question.

**Respondents’ characteristics**

60.2% of respondents were female (281/467). The modal age was 19 years (40.6%, 191/471), followed closely by 20 years (34.6%, 163/471), 18 years (10.2%, 48/471), and 21 years (7.6%, 36/471), with over 21 year olds making up the remainder (6.8%, 32/471). Less than ten percent (8.9%, 42/474) had completed a previous degree.

**Respondents’ knowledge**

On analysis of the respondents’ prior training, 47.0% (218/464) had previous formal first aid training; in addition, 9.7% (46/474) had further training with oxygen and 15.4% (73/474) were trained in the use of an automated external defibrillator (AED).

In respect of certification with one of the three well-recognised UK first aid bodies (British Red Cross, St John Ambulance and St Andrew’s Ambulance), 19.9% (94/472) currently held a first aid certificate and a further 10.0% (47/472) previously held a certificate at some stage.

Students were asked a series of questions regarding their knowledge of first aid using a five-point Likert scale; the responses included strongly agree, agree, no strong views, disagree and strongly disagree. Where the five-point Likert scale was used, unless stated otherwise, figures quoted in this paper equal a summation of the ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ responses for questions.

Of those responding, 43.5% (206/474) believed they had a good knowledge of first aid and 36.0% (169/469) would feel confident helping in an emergency medical situation. However, only 10.1% (43/426) would feel confident leading an emergency medical situation (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q 7</td>
<td>Currently I have a good level of first aid knowledge</td>
<td>43.5%</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 8</td>
<td>Currently I would feel confident in helping with an emergency situation</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 9</td>
<td>Currently I would feel confident in leading an emergency situation</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Medical students’ attitudes towards first aid**

98.1% (468/477) students thought first aid training is beneficial to medical students: 89.7% (428/477) strongly agreed and 8.4% (40/477) agreed. 97.7% (460/471) believed there is an expectation from the general public that medical students should know what to do in a pre-hospital medical emergency (Figure 1). However, only 56.7% (270/476) felt they had an obligation, as a medical student, to assist.
Table 2: Summary of medical students’ expectations with regard to first aid in the medical curriculum (figures equal the summation of the “strongly agree” and “agree” responses on a five-point Likert scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage of Students</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q 18</td>
<td>First aid training should be a pre-requisite for entry to medical school</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q 19</td>
<td>First aid training should be included in the core curriculum</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarities & differences between the responses of the first and second year medical students

The questionnaire was delivered to all first and second year medical students at QUB. 255 out of a possible 261 first year students responded, providing a first year response rate of 97.7%. 224 of a possible 267 second years responded with a second year response rate of 83.9%. It was noted there were some differences between the two year groups. 52.6% (133/253) of first year students believed they had a good level of first aid knowledge compared to 33.0% (73/221) of second year students. 46.4% (116/250) of first year students felt confident helping with an emergency situation compared to 24.2% (53/219) second year students. Interestingly, both year groups were equally unconfident in respect of leading an emergency medical situation: 77.1% (195/253) of first years and 84.4% (146/173) of second years disagreed or strongly disagreed when responding to the statement “currently, I would feel confident leading an emergency medical situation”.

First year students felt a greater obligation to help at a medical emergency than second year students: 62.8% (159/253) compared to 49.8% (111/223) respectively. However, a greater proportion of second years believed first aid training should be included in the core curriculum: 95.5% (211/221) compared to 87.6% (218/249) second year and first year students respectively.

Year groups’ views were similar with respect to first aid training: 97.6% (248/254) of first year students and 98.7% (220/223) of second year students agreed or strongly agreed that first aid training is beneficial for medical students. In addition, both groups believed there is an expectation from the general public that medical students should know what to do at an emergency medical situation: 96.8% (240/248) of first year students and 98.7% (220/223) of second year students.

Both year groups agreed equally that this training should be in the pre-clinical years (Years 1 and 2), with almost 80% suggesting Year 1. Again, almost 80% of both year groups agreed teaching should be to the highest level, including Basic Life Support (BLS), use of oxygen and an AED, and a full first aid course.

Discussion

The results of this study provide us with the opinions and experiences of a large cohort of first and second year medical students. The students appear to value first aid and consider it to have a place in the medical curriculum. They believe there are expectations from the general public for medical students to help in emergency situations; however, concerns regarding confidence in handling such situations are evident. Trends and
anomalies in the data collected will be considered, along with
our suggested explanations for their occurrence.

Firstly, the response rate varied between questions; the students
were not obliged to answer all questions, so may have chosen
not to answer a particular question, or they may have failed
to complete the questionnaire. In hindsight, the question was vague and therefore
had indeed answered the question, but in actual fact the keypad
equipment failed.

Approximately the same number of students felt they had a
good level of first aid knowledge as those that had undertaken
previous first aid training; it is possible these are the same
students, explaining the confidence. If this is the case, it is
reasonable to assume the rest of the students did not feel they
had a good knowledge of first aid as they had never completed
any training.

Although some students feel they have a good knowledge and/or
may have completed training, they are not confident putting
their knowledge into practice in an emergency situation. This
highlights students’ need to practise their theory and skills in a
safe environment, for example, with simulated patients.

There was a significant difference between the students’
confidence helping with an emergency situation and leading one;
the latter finding is perhaps because they interpreted ‘helping
with an emergency situation’ as a scenario where they would be
given clear instructions by a trained person and would thus not
require any first aid knowledge of their own. Alternatively, the
latter setting forces them to envisage themselves more clearly in
such a situation, and they realise the gravity of the circumstances
and the limitations of their knowledge.

Of the 47% that had undertaken formal first aid training, 19.9%
currently held a certificate (completed within the last three
years), and 10.0% had previously held a certificate (completed
more than three years ago) obtained through one of the three
well-recognised UK first aid bodies: British Red Cross, St John
Ambulance or St Andrew’s Ambulance. These figures confer
that although nearly half of the students have completed first
aid training at some point, a quarter of the qualifications gained
with the recognised bodies are out of date, meaning knowledge
and insurance are potentially invalid. It is not known where the
remaining 17.1% of students who had formal first aid training
received their teaching as the questionnaire did not permit
free responses. Thus, the quality of their teaching course, type
of qualification and insurance status is unknown. This highlights
the need for a single, standardised course, with all the relevant
information pitched at an appropriate level for medical students
to be included within the medical curriculum, so medical
students can practise first aid safely, in the knowledge that their
skills and insurance are up-to-date.

The belief that there is an expectation from the general public
for medical students to have the knowledge to handle an
emergency situation probably explains the high proportion of
students who value first aid and wish for it to be provided
at medical school. Both these findings again emphasise the need
for its inclusion within the medical curriculum.

There was ambiguity regarding the statement ‘medical students
have an obligation to assist in an emergency medical situation’;
as students enquired verbally if this obligation was legal or
moral. In hindsight, the question was vague and therefore
responses were affected by differing interpretations. In addition,
many students perhaps do not actually know their legal status
regarding such matters and therefore could not have answered
the question accurately.

We surmise a majority of students disagreed or strongly disagreed
with the statement “first aid should be a pre-requisite for medical school” as many would not have obtained a place
had they been required to have a first aid qualification. Currently,
those who have a qualification prior to medical school have
an advantage in their applications and personal statements. To
request first aid as a pre-requisite levels the playing field and
devalues those who have a genuine interest and dedication
to first aid. Financially, and with regard to time, students may
also find it difficult to complete a full first aid course in late
secondary school due to the pressures of their studies. Lastly,
first aid organisations have limited places and resources; a
rush of ten thousand or more students a year would be
overwhelming. In view of these facts, there is an ever-present
danger in requesting first aid as a pre-requisite, in that it could
discourage students from applying.

A significant proportion desired first aid training as early in the
course as possible. This coincides with students’ beliefs that the
general public have expectations and that first aid is beneficial,
and suggests that students wish to undergo preparation for
such a situation as soon after entering medical school as
possible. The format of the questionnaire allowed students
to choose one year only in which they wished to see first aid
included. However, as the questionnaire was being conducted,
students asked if the training could be provided in multiple years,
suggesting preference of training on more than one occasion,
possibly continually throughout their course.

**Similarities & differences between the responses of the first
and second year medical students**

The response rate of first years was much higher than that of
second years. This could be due to less second years choosing
to participate, however, it is also possible, considering the
questionnaire was delivered during a practical teaching session,
that more second year students failed to attend their scheduled
teaching and therefore missed the delivery of the questionnaire
to that group of students.

More first year students had previous first aid training than
second year students which could explain why significantly
more first year students believed they had a good level of
first aid knowledge and more would feel confident helping in
an emergency situation. Alternatively, first year students are,
anecdotally, more over-confident than second years: students
perhaps realise more the limitations of their knowledge as they
progress through their training. Interestingly, both year groups
were equally not confident about leading an emergency medical
situation, suggesting students may realise the limitations of their
professional competence to a certain degree.

Although agreeing equally that first aid training is beneficial
and that there is an expectation from the public that medical
students should know how to handle a pre-hospital emergency,
both year groups were divided over their obligation to assist
in such a situation. This was likely due to the reasons discussed
above. However, slightly more first year students felt an
obligation to help at a medical emergency than second year
students, again attributable to over-confidence or because a
greater proportion of first years had previous first aid training.
More second year students believed that training should be
included in the core medical curriculum, which coincides with
their lesser confidence in the emergency situation and fewer
having had training in the past.

**Limitations**

The findings of this study have to be considered within its
limitations. The questionnaire we used was not validated by
prior research. Although the response rate was good, the
questionnaire was conducted in one UK medical school only,
and therefore may or may not be applicable to all schools in the
UK. To improve generalisability, it would be necessary to deliver
the same questionnaire at other UK medical schools.
In addition, only first and second year students (i.e. pre-clinical students) were invited to participate. Third, fourth and fifth year students were not given the opportunity to express their views; the findings may or may not be applicable to students further advanced in their training, and there may be a changing opinion as students progress through their medical career.

The method used to deliver the questionnaire meant that following completion of the questionnaire, it is possible that students may have discussed its contents with colleagues who had yet to participate, which may or may not have affected responses.

Conclusion

Only a small proportion of students believed their first aid knowledge was adequate. An overwhelming proportion thought first aid training beneficial and that the public expect competency in managing emergencies. Students believe first aid should be in the core curriculum, during pre-clinical years to the highest training level possible.

Following these findings and the UK General Medical Council Tomorrow’s Doctors recommendations, the QUB first year core curriculum included a full first aid course for the first time in 2010–2011 academic year.

Future research should include surveying other UK medical schools, improving generalisability of results, and sampling the public to ascertain expectations of students’ first aid knowledge.

Declarations

The authors have no financial or other interests to declare in relation to this paper.

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