

The Importance of Teaching and Assessing Communication Skills in Medical Education

Effective communication between the patient and the healthcare professional is at the core of delivering high quality healthcare. It enhances healthcare quality and can change the patients' perception of a disease considerably (Fong Ha & Longnecker 2010). This issue of South-East Asian Journal of Medical Education features two original research papers (Sari *et al.*, 2014; Susilo *et al.*, 2014), and a short communication (Rahim *et al.*, 2014) based on different aspects of teaching and assessment of communication skills, highlighting their importance in medical education.

However, in comparison to other competencies in medicine, communication skills are often considered to be less important by medical students as well as some teachers. The South-East Asian (SEA) region needs to adopt international best practices in teaching and assessing communication and adapt them according to regional needs. The ideal approach of teaching communication skills is practice based, including on the job training and role modelling. Communication skills training should continue longitudinally throughout the medical curriculum rather than be taught as a single module, so that students will be able to communicate effectively in different settings and contexts.

Valid and reliable assessment of communication skills can be challenging, as these skills are difficult to assess through written tests. A range of assessment methods and tools including Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) and work-place based assessment are available. Clearly defined target skills and well trained observers can provide a high reliability.

Training and assessment of communication skills can pose several challenges to medical educationists in the SEA region. Understanding that the benefits of teaching and assessing communication skills outweigh the challenges of implementing can motivate teachers and learners.

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