Supporting patients with learning disabilities

St. George’s Medical School was one of the first medical schools to provide a comprehensive learning disability component in the medical school curriculum. Since 1982 the teaching has evolved in response to the needs of students and the teaching methods are firmly grounded in best evidence from research. This means that a key part of the teaching is ensuring that students get an opportunity to meet people with learning disabilities and to think about the broader issues such as institutional discrimination and diagnostic overshadowing.

The teaching is delivered by a multidisciplinary team which includes a clinical psychologist, psychiatrists, a speech and language therapist and training advisors (people with learning disability who are trained to teach medical students). The students receive a series of lectures, throughout their training, starting in year one with an introduction to the concept and constructs of learning disability. In year two they are taught about the processes behind health inequalities. In the third year students are taught specific communication skills in workshops with simulated patients, who are actors with learning disabilities skilled in training medical students. There is an emphasis on the transferability of the skills taught on the basis that ‘if you can get it right for people with learning disability...’

All students also have a specialist learning disability attachment as part of their GP attachment where they meet a patient and their carer in the community to conduct a health check (e.g. blood pressure, urine dip, BMI etc.) and complete a Hospital Passport (see www.easyhealth.org.uk/FileAccess.aspx?id=1906). They are taught about specific communication skills, and resources such as Books Beyond Words (see www.rcpsych.ac.uk/publications/bbw) and websites full of really useful information such as www.intellectualdisability.info. They also have the opportunity to develop a topic of special interest and present it to their peers. Feedback is collected regularly from students and is consistent in its praise for the curriculum. We use a very interactive and dynamic method of teaching which draws on current portrayals of disability in the popular media (e.g. films such as Inside I am Dancing and Precious) and issues in the news (such as informed consent and assisted suicide). This strategy seems to ensure that learning disability is seen as a live and interesting topic, and one with which the students can engage. For instance, here is some feedback emailed from one of the students: ‘Loved the Disability lectures! They were interesting and informative. The clips you showed were really effective at emphasizing what was in the lecture notes’.

The students also consistently report gaining much confidence from their experience of meeting the actors, trainers and real life patient in the community. Many refer to a new understanding of being able to see the person behind the disability while demonstrating an awareness of the increased complications associated with learning disability. In addition, the students are encouraged to think about the social inequalities that compound the health inequalities, which are well documented in the literature. This thoughtfulness is reflected in their special interest topics, which are broad ranging and demonstrate much initiative and enthusiasm. For example, students have made short films, conducted small research projects and campaigned for change in organisations.

From our perspective, teaching at St. George’s is a real privilege and it is exciting to see the students learn and it is even more exciting when they display a new found enthusiasm for learning disability. We always tell the students that any future patient with learning disability would be lucky to have them as their doctor. And we firmly believe this to be true.

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The GMC is developing a new web-based resource for doctors to help them work more effectively with patients who have a learning disability. As part of the research and development phase of the project, which we hope will be completed in early 2011, GMC staff have been attending workshop sessions at St George’s medical school, whose learning disability course for undergraduate medical students was praised in Sir Jonathan Michael’s report Healthcare for all.

We will also be working on this project with Mencap. You can find out more about their work supporting people with learning difficulties in healthcare at www.mencap.org.uk/gettingitright

If you want to share your experiences of local initiatives, however small, that have improved your understanding of the issues, or changed your practice please send them to standards@gmc-uk.org