

Evaluating a weekly face-to-face informal discussion forum for final year medical students

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Abstract: Realising possible unmet needs of final year medical students we initiated a weekly informal face-to-face discussion forum between them and the teaching faculty of the department of medicine. Various academic and non-academic topics, as dictated by the students, were discussed in 19 weekly sessions. Evaluation by the students was subsequently done by means of an on-line questionnaire after the final examinations. The aim of this study was to evaluate this forum, undertaken for the first time in our institution, by assessing student feedback. We conclude that although the number of attendees and responders were small, feedback was generally positive. This type of forum can be improved upon and serve as another portal for benefitting students.

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A university course, particularly in medicine, is long and challenging. Students have many needs – both academic and others related to daily life, including concerns for the future. Some of these are often unmet and may result in them underperforming. There is also increasing emphasis on student welfare in medical education which has moved the centre of gravity away from the teacher and closer to the student, the current concept being about learning and learners rather than teaching and teachers.¹

Many students in large groups may feel shy and not participate in formal and large group sessions, but may be more at ease in smaller and informal settings.² A rigid classroom format and solemn atmosphere do not encourage students to speak freely. This has been suggested to be more prevalent amongst Asian students who are said to be more passive, tending to prefer whole class or individual work to group or pair work.³

Realising this, we initiated an informal weekly face-to-face discussion forum, calling it “Fridays with Medicine”,

between final year medical students and the teaching staff of the department of medicine. Students in the final year were chosen on the assumption that they would have the greatest needs in the months preceding their final examinations.

Nineteen weekly sessions, each lasting about 45 minutes, were held for a class of 112 students for 5 months. Attendance was encouraged but not made compulsory. It was conducted in a round table fashion to stress informality. Students dictated topics for discussion. Sometimes when students had different specific questions the session spontaneously broke up into a number of subgroups with one-to-one discussions. All questions and topics raised were recorded and analysed retrospectively. Students’ views on the benefits of such a forum were subsequently evaluated through an on-line questionnaire after the final examinations.

Each forum was attended by an average of 6 students and 3 faculty members. Forty-two (42) topics were discussed, falling into 5 themes; namely medical, feedback on curriculum delivery, future career guidance, social issues and approaches to learning.

Medically related topics, 16 in all, formed the largest group, covering various aspects of medicine and concepts which they had difficulty in understanding. Matters were clarified and their doubts cleared by the lecturers present. Feedback on 12 issues regarding curriculum delivery was given. 4 students had queries about their future careers. These were especially about criteria to consider when choosing hospitals for internship and regarding subsequent specialist training. 4 students had personal and social issues and 2 wanted to know of better study techniques.

Results of the on-line questionnaire, to which 36 students responded, showed that 28.9% of the respondents had attended the forum 3 or more times while 31.6% did not attend any. 71.1% felt it was a good addition to the curriculum and should be continued. The 5 main perceived benefits were given as “it gave me an opportunity to clarify doubts I encountered in my

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learning” (55.3%), “I benefited from discussion points raised by others” (55.3%), “I valued it as a platform to give feedback regarding the delivery of the curriculum” (47.4%), “I valued this opportunity to interact with the academic staff” (44.7%) and “helpful to discuss about future career and training pathways” (42.1%). Other benefits mentioned included the forum being a platform to discuss non-medical/non-academic issues (34.2%) and for learning about ethics and professionalism (21.1%).

Overall a face-to-face discussion forum such as this appears to be of benefit to final year students. Many academic and personal issues were raised which students would not have been possible to air in a traditional classroom environment. Other studies have also shown that courses involving regular interaction with faculty result in overall increase in student confidence levels. The most helpful aspect of such courses was felt to be the weekly discussion sessions.⁴ Every one of the teaching staff involved also appreciated the sessions and felt they had in at least a small way contributed to the better being of the students and improved student-staff rapport. Romm’s paper⁴ also reported better mentor-mentee relationships between students and faculty. However limitations to interpretation of the evaluation

in this study include the very small number of students who attended, and only a third of the class responding to the questionnaire. The latter is most likely due to the evaluation being done after the final examinations. The response rate would most likely have been higher if held towards the end of term. There was also no feedback from the large number of students who did not attend as to why they had not. It would have been interesting to get their views on this, especially as to whether any addition or modification to the format would have made them consider attending. Nevertheless feedback from those who attended – presumably those with needs – indicated that their needs had been met. From this and the minimal effort involved in its implementation we conclude that this type of forum is beneficial to students and should be continued. It can be improved upon and even expanded to include students from other years.

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