

Geriatrics Week: A Teaching Opportunity to Improve the Medical Education Curriculum to Care for an Aging Population

The population of Americans age 65 years and older is estimated to nearly double from 43.1 million in 2012 to 83.7 million in 2050.¹ Over the past 40 years, geriatrics education has made strides, with faculty improving the content in the predoctoral curriculum. Still, there is much room for improvement.² Due to the aging baby boomer population, it is more important than ever for faculty and residents to help prepare medical students to care for geriatric patients. Care for geriatric patients differs from care for the general population due to age-related physiological changes, physical and mental disease, and social problems.²

A focused and well-planned faculty- and resident-run engagement activity for medical students in their clinical years may address this problem. The University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine offers a 1-week required geriatrics rotation for all third-year medical students. Interdisciplinary team training is an essential component of quality geriatric care delivery. This rotation has been well-received by medical students who are able to approach geriatric case studies with teams of students concentrating in physical therapy, occupational therapy, pharmacy, speech and language pathology, physician assistant practice, and advanced nursing practice. Faculty representatives from the various disciplines, as well as residents, fellows, and faculty in internal medicine, geriatric medicine, and palliative care, are present to offer their perspectives throughout the week.

Curricular innovations spearheaded by faculty and residents in geriatric medical education may help students learn about geriatric syndromes as well as develop clinical skills, such as interviewing patients with dementia, and advanced team skills, such as care coordination. Focused education through a geriatrics week curriculum could provide students with hands-on experience in geriatrics by allowing them to interview patients at assisted living facilities and organize health fairs at nursing homes to practice drug reconciliation and cognitive function tests, among other activities. A geriatrics rotation may also provide a good multidisciplinary setting to discuss sensitive end-of-life issues with patients. This gives residents an opportunity to get further involved in teaching and builds a foundation for medical students to understand and practice interdisciplinary care for older patients.

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