

RE-EXAMINING THE PREMEDICAL YEARS AS A CRUCIAL PERIOD FOR PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION (PIF)

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Background: It has been well established that there is a decrease in empathy in medical students during their clinical years of medical school. The skills that help prevent empathy decline such as reflection are not adequately developed or addressed during medical school or during premedical years. Empathy development and preservation is part of a physician's Professional Identity Formation (PIF) which is affected by the messaging of both premedical and medical school years.

Objective/Hypothesis: Analyze the premedical and medical school curriculum regarding the development of skills that preserve empathy, and where there is room for improvement.

Methods: A comprehensive literature review was done via PubMed. A list of MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms were created in collaboration with a librarian to find articles of interest regarding graduate medical education, medical school, medical education, empathy, compassion, reflection, medical curriculum, hidden curriculum, and other terms. In addition to the use of the MeSH terms on PubMed, certain key phrases were also used to search PubMed such as empathy decline, premedical burnout, hidden curriculum. Additionally, some papers were found via recommended articles and reference lists of other papers.

Conclusions: The premedical years remain a potential period to help students develop the skills necessary to develop and maintain clinical empathy. The premedical years are a crucial phase of a physician's Professional Identity Formation. Currently, the premedical years do little to develop humanistic medicine skills actively and intentionally such as reflection, mindfulness, and discussion-based learning, all of which are important for developing and maintaining empathy for physicians. The premedical years has a hidden curriculum that contains underlying messaging that values natural sciences and devalues the humanities and the humanistic aspect of medicine. In particular, the framing of a career in medicine through a checklist of grades, classes, research, and test scores does little to develop awareness of the humanistic skills necessary to PIF. Overall, we ought to treat the premedical years as equally important to PIF and look at the kind of preparation students receive to be humanistic physicians and the skills necessary be able to preserve their empathy through clinical training and practice.

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