

Food Systems & Health: A Novel Elective for First-Year Medical Students

Bridget Lerman MPH

Medical Student, University of Colorado School of Medicine

Educational Objectives

- Describe how social determinants of health impact food-related noncommunicable diseases.
- Assess perceived and physical barriers to food access.
- Identify and utilize food-focused community assets to improve patient outcomes.
- Utilize nutrition guidelines and research to inform individualized dietary recommendations.
- Develop and practice effective patient counseling skills.

Abstract

Introduction: Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading causes of morbidity and mortality. Food plays a substantial role in the development of many NCDs. Existing interventions on food-related NCDs focus on clinical nutrition but overlook systemic factors impacting people's food interactions; these factors must be acknowledged and addressed to feasibly change health behaviors. Through a systems-level approach, the Food Systems & Health (FS&H) elective aims to address this educational demand, empowering future physicians to meet the multidimensional needs of their patients and communities.

Methods: FS&H is a novel elective course for first-year medical students. The pilot course consisted of 12 weekly one-hour modules, each covering a unique topic encompassing one or multiple educational pillars: food systems, nutrition & health, and practical skills. The curriculum emphasized intersectionality and featured a diverse team of interdisciplinary content experts as module facilitators. Evaluation included module and course assessments.

Results: Three students enrolled and completed pre- and post-course surveys. 100% strongly agreed that the elective addressed a critical gap in their education. Two students demonstrated increased confidence in clinical skills, and one demonstrated improved knowledge.

Discussion: FS&H meets a vital need in medical education and enhances students' knowledge and/or confidence in addressing food-related issues. The curriculum has the potential to increase food systems knowledge while shifting students' beliefs and confidence regarding food systems in patient care. Future directions for this elective include increasing practical skills development and exploring additional community assets.