

Re-examining the Premedical Years as an Integral Part of Professional Identity Formation

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Purpose: To determine how the premedical years can offer a protective effect for empathy decline in the clinical year of medical school through analyzing how the hidden curriculum of premedical years affects Professional Identity Formation (PIF).

Methods: A literature review was completed via PubMed. Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms were created about graduate medical education, medical school, medical education, empathy, reflection, medical curriculum, and hidden curriculum.

Results: Empathy declines in the 3rd year of medical school. Interventions that utilize reflection and mindfulness help preserve empathy levels in medical school. Those who enter medical school with higher levels of empathy have less empathy decline, suggesting a protective factor gained during premedical years. Premedical education has a hidden curriculum that emphasizes the natural sciences and devalues the humanities. Particularly, premedical students view what it takes to be a physician as a checklist of grades, research, and test scores which does little to develop the humanistic skills necessary to PIF. This is evident through premedical advising, perceptions of what makes a good applicant, and the application requirements for medical school, all of which make up a hidden curriculum of premedical education.

Conclusions: The premedical years are a potential period for students to develop the skills necessary to maintain clinical empathy. The premedical years are a crucial phase of a physician's PIF. Currently, the premedical years and its hidden curriculum do little to develop humanistic medicine skills such as reflection, mindfulness, and discussion-based learning, all of which are important for developing and maintaining empathy as physicians.
