Disability-related experiences in health care curricula

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Objective

Information was gathered from faculty members who represent seven medical schools and two nursing schools that have taken steps to incorporate disability-related experiences into their curricula. The information concerns the teaching modalities used to train students regarding disability and how the experiences fit within the broader curriculum. The nine schools are a subset of those represented in the Alliance for Disability in Health Care Education.

Background

Students in the health care disciplines are often ill-prepared to provide appropriate and effective care to persons who have developmental or acquired disabilities. Their training typically involves little direct contact with persons who have disabilities and does not address the complex array of contextual (clinical, functional, social, etc.) issues that impact on the care needs of these individuals. The Alliance for Disability in Health Care Education is a group of educators in medicine, nursing, dentistry and pharmacy who have within their home institutions a range of didactic and experiential components intended to teach students about aspects of health care for persons with acquired and/or developmental disabilities. The experiences, varied in structure and focus, are intended to favorably impact students’ knowledge about disability; their understanding of the interplay between health care and the “functional lives” of persons with disabilities; their attitudes about serving persons with disabilities; and, ultimately, their effectiveness in serving this patient population.

Method

Data were solicited through a structured online survey of Alliance members in late 2007, with updates solicited in April 2009. At the time of the original survey, Alliance members represented twelve schools. Alliance members from nine schools provided data. Respondents provided descriptive information regarding disability-related experiences that they have incorporated into their curricula.

Results

Disability-related experiences reported by the Alliance are indicated in Table 1. Of the seven medical schools, six provide training or experiences to undergraduate medical students and two provide such training or experiences to residents. Curricula typically include an outplacement component in the form of clerkships, internships, service-learning projects or other community placements. A majority of the disability-related experiences are required of all students at their respective schools. Training in the nursing programs is at the graduate and undergraduate levels. It should be noted that these data reflect training efforts with which Alliance members were involved or of which they were aware. Other efforts at their institutions might exist that are not reported here.

Conclusion

The data reflect a broad array of teaching modalities employed by Alliance members to teach students about disability. While the most frequently cited modality was lecture, the data suggest that efforts at most schools include multiple teaching modalities. Efforts at some schools include a considerable investment in experiential components in which students have direct contact with individuals who have disabilities.