Title: Understanding the Role of Near-peers in Influencing Professional Identity Formation in Undergraduate Medical Education: A mixed methods study

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MEDICAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

Background: Professional identity formation (PIF) is influenced by interactions with patients, providers, peers, and classroom experiences.¹ Gaps exist in understanding how students incorporate these encounters into their professional identity.

Objectives: We aimed to characterize factors that influence PIF in undergraduate medical students.

Methods/Design: A sequential mixed methods study was conducted involving: (1) a cross-sectional survey of M1-M4 students to quantify the influence of patients, providers, peers and classes on PIF; and (2) semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews to elicit descriptions of experiences that influence PIF. The Oldenburg Burnout Inventory assessed self-reported burnout. Transcripts were analyzed using Strauss and Corbin’s constant comparative method for thematic analysis. Responses were compared by school year.

Results: Quantitative surveys were completed by 259 students (RR=51%). Patients and providers strongly influenced PIF across all years. Peer influence rose each year of training (M1=49%, M2=61%, M3=67%, M4=80%, p<0.002). Students with higher burnout were significantly less sensitive to patients (p=0.03), providers (p=0.02), and classes (p=0.002) but not peer influences (p=0.33). Qualitative data was collected from 37 students, yielding 236 responses over 863 recorded minutes. Providers Interactions: students were heavily influenced by observing providers interact with patients (n=38/74), primarily identifying positive examples of professionalism and behaviors they intend to emulate. Patients: students
described one-on-one patient interactions (n=38/42); clerkship students used patient’s responses as feedback and pre-clerkship students used patient interactions for trial and error. Peers: peers challenged students to raise personal standards and set individualized professionalism goals based on behavior of respected peers. Classes: students evaluated the professionalism of instructors and learned to work in groups.

Conclusions: PIF is shaped by emulating physicians and reflecting on one-on-one patient encounters. Burnout may desensitize students to these non-peer influences. Peers challenge students to rise to higher standards. Preclerkship students interact informally as classmates, while clerkship students identify as colleagues and create professional communities of practice.

References: