

Medical Education Research

‘Characterizing the Impact of Medical Student Clinical Exposure to Patients with Opioid Use Disorder on Perceptions of Stigma and Patient Care’

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Background: Opioid use disorder (OUD) is a growing public health crisis. While governing bodies in medical education (e.g. ACGME and AAMC) have called upon academic medical centers to incorporate training in OUD earlier in medical education, many residents and physicians do not feel comfortable working with patients with OUD. Social stigma promotes negative attitudes toward these patients and is a roadblock to delivering equitable and effective care. Opportunities exist to understand how medical schools can utilize existing clinical encounters to influence students’ approach to patients to OUD and affect stigma.

Objective: This study sought to characterize medical students’ experiences with patients with OUD, understand the features that make a patient encounter memorable, and explore the factors that influence future practice and/or stigma.

Methods/Design: A qualitative study was conducted using Grounded Theory and purposive sampling of fourth-year medical students (M4s) enrolled at Wake Forest School of Medicine. Data collection consisted of a free-text survey, followed by semi-structured interviews. The survey served to gain an understanding of student encounters with OUD, and interviews helped gain a deeper understanding of the impact on future practice and stigma. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data.

Results: A total of 170 out of 237 students (RR = 71.7%) completed the free-text survey, and twelve students were interviewed. Patient encounters occurred in three primary settings: Emergency Department, Inpatient Clerkship, or Narcotics Anonymous meetings. Clinical encounters were memorable when there was: conflict with patients/teams, complicated care, inadequate care, and relevance to the student’s future career. Memorable encounters influenced future practice by changing students’ approaches to: future treatment, future communication, or professionalism.

Regarding OUD stigma, students reported that these encounters made them: more aware of stereotypes in medicine, stereotypes in their personal lives, and generated actions that students want to take.

Conclusions: An influential clinical encounter has the potential to influence medical students' clinical management and stigma towards OUD. Not all encounters had a defining impact on students' stigma toward OUD. Emotionally-charged encounters impacted students through fostering empathy and perspective-taking. Medical schools need to create opportunities that will have lasting impact by encouraging students to fully engage with patients with OUD.