

Undergraduate Training in Mental Handicap

Section for the Psychiatry of Mental Handicap

Changing concepts of care mean that all doctors, whatever their specialty, will have increasing contact with the mentally handicapped in their day to day practice. It is therefore essential that the amount of time devoted to this topic in medical schools is substantially increased and the nature of training radically reviewed to provide adequate clinical experience. There is evidence that medical students would welcome this.

Aims

The primary aim should be to give the young doctor sufficient knowledge and understanding of the field of Mental Handicap to enable him to deal sensitively and knowledgeably with mentally handicapped people and their families whom he might encounter as a general practitioner or in hospital practice.

Experience in mental handicap is also of general benefit to the young doctor. Many of the principles involved in the care, management and rehabilitation of the mentally handicapped and their families are equally applicable across a wide range of conditions; invaluable experience is provided in crisis intervention and the long-term management of chronic disabilities.

Organisation and administration

Students should preferably have a brief introduction to the topic in the first year, but the main exposure should come towards the end of their training.

Some aspects of training and experience will be gained in paediatrics, family and community medicine, genetics, etc., but the core training should be provided by Departments of Psychiatry who should be responsible for the overall co-ordination of teaching and presenting an integrated over-view of the subject. A minimum of 12–15 hours of curriculum time is required for core training.

Content

The following essential elements should be covered:

- Epidemiology, classification, aetiology, prevention, clinical features and associated disorders of mental handicap.
- Social and family aspects.
- Assessment and management of the individual.
- Concepts of care and service systems—where to get or refer for help.
- Major ethical problems.

Teaching methods

Seminars, case presentations and workshops which maximise possibilities for undergraduate participation are

recommended. Films and videos may be used to supplement visits and to give an over-view of the range of facilities available.

Students should always have the opportunity to meet mentally handicapped patients and their relatives. How this is achieved will depend upon local circumstances. Ideally it should take the form of clerking cases, but sitting in on outpatient clinics and interviews or special case presentations are acceptable alternatives. The use of video to give a longitudinal picture of problems and progress is recommended.

Electives

Provision for an elective period is now available in all medical undergraduate curriculae and an increasing number of undergraduates are using all or some of this time to gain more experience in mental handicap.

It is essential that a proper programme is drawn up and that the elective period is made as interesting as possible. Electives may last anything from a week to two months and the programme will depend upon the time available and the interests of each student. Detailed case studies provide an excellent method of involving the student and exposing him to the range of problems and provisions.

Students on long electives should be encouraged to use part of this time to obtain experience of services overseas or in centres of excellence in this country.

Reading material

It is accepted that different teaching hospitals will have their own preferences and that the material available changes from time to time. The College Reading List should be consulted for suitable textbooks and references.

It has to be recognised that many students will not buy books, particularly on highly specialised subjects, and it is therefore recommended that comprehensive handouts be prepared.

Assessment, examinations and prizes

It is now common practice to ask medical students to evaluate their teaching and training. In the case of mental handicap this might be usefully combined with an assessment of their views of mental handicap at the commencement and end of the course.

Mental handicap should be represented in the final examinations in psychiatry.

Prizes for special projects or essays help to foster interest in the subject.

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