JMC Students' Knowledge of the U.S. Healthcare System

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A national survey of medical students identified gaps in knowledge of key issues facing the U.S. healthcare system.[1] How does Jefferson first year students' knowledge compare to their colleagues?

As a part of the first year Jefferson Medical College (JMC) curriculum for medical practice for the 21st century (MP-21), the author of this article gave three lectures to students encompassing part of the material reported in the Academic Medicine article. Using the audience response system, a slightly modified version of the examination was administered prior to the first lecture. The Table compares the responses of JMC students to their colleagues nationally.

Overall, the knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of the healthcare system is similar among Jefferson students as compared to their peers. Thirty-nine percent of JMC students incorrectly answered that the United States had the lowest infant mortality rate (item 2) and 17 percent incorrectly answered that the United States has a higher life expectancy than any other nation (item 1). Only 52 percent of JMC first year students realized that the United States is the only industrialized nation in the world that does not guarantee access to health care for all of citizens (item 4).

Over 90 percent of JMC students answered correctly when asked about some of the consequences of lack of health insurance, such as not having a regular source of medical care, avoidable hospitalizations for diseases such as asthma and diabetes mellitus, and delayed diagnosis for cancer (items 6-8). Ninety-five percent of JMC students knew that the number of uninsured has increased in the United States over the last decade (item11), however only 36 percent correctly responded to the item about the number of uninsured people in the United States (item 13), with most underestimating the magnitude of the problem.

In the national survey, it was the students' opinion that health policy is not adequately covered in the medical school curriculum. Agrawal et al concluded:

> Medical educators should consider expanding and enhancing health policy curricula to improve students' satisfaction with their education and to produce a physician work force prepared to function and improve the system in which they work.[1]

JMC first year students' knowledge of the health care system is similar to their peers nationally. With U.S. healthcare costs over 16 percent of the GDP and 45 million people without health insurance, health policy is clearly an important issue. How can we best

integrate health policy in the JMC curriculum to assist our students in meeting the challenges of practicing medicine in the 21st century?

Reference:

1. Agrawal JR, Huebner J, Hedgecock J, Sehgal AR, Jung P, Simon SR. Medical students' knowledge of the U.S. health care system and their preferences for curricular change: A national survey; *Academic Medicine*. 2005;80(5): 484-488.

Table: Survey responses at JMC compared to a national survey

		Correct response	% correct (1st year medical students)	
			National survey[1]	JMC students*
1.	The United States has a higher life expectancy than any other nation in the world.	**False**	72%	83%
2.	The United States has a lower infant mortality rate than any other nation in the world.	**False**	59%	61%
3.	Government-administered health insurance (e.g., Medicare) requires more money per person for administrative costs than private health insurance.	**False**	47%	37%
4.	The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world not to guarantee access to health care for all of its citizens.	**True**	40%	52%
5.	The United States spends more per person on health care annually than any other nation in the world.	**True**	69%	83%
6.	People without health insurance are less likely to have a regular source of medical care.	**True**	97%	97%
7.	People without health insurance are more likely to suffer from avoidable hospitalizations for diseases such as asthma and diabetes mellitus.	**True**	96%	92%
8.	People without health insurance are more likely to suffer from delayed diagnoses for diseases like cancer.	**True**	98%	98%
9.	Most individuals without health insurance are in families where no one works.	**False**	87%	86%
10.	Raising the cost of co-payments or deductibles does not affect whether patients will go see their doctor.	**False**	90%	90%
11.	The number of uninsured individuals in the United States increased over the last decade.	**True**	89%	95%
12.	Where, approximately, did the United States rank, out of 191 countries, in a 2000 World Health Organization report on "health systems performance?"	**Near 40th place**	13%	27%
13.	How many uninsured people are there in the United States today?	**40 to 50 million**	31%	36%

* Administered to JMC first year students using the audience response system on November 29, 2005.