

Practising medicine holistically

Training for third year medical students

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I have had an interest and passion for promoting a holistic approach in medical care throughout my career as a general practitioner. I have also been aware of the detrimental affect burnout can have on practitioners themselves and the care of their patients.¹ I had an opportunity in 2006 to run a student selected component (SSC) module at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) and I have facilitated 17 modules to date.

Summary

The background for an SSC in holistic medicine is outlined. The teaching process for this module with the content of the sessions for each week is described, and the students' comments from their written report of the SSC are included in the text. The sessions have a planned format but are flexible enough to respond to the needs of each group. The place of holistic medical training in the undergraduate programme is discussed.

What is an SSC?

The SSC programme is a substantial element of the medical curriculum in which students select non-core topics to study. The General Medical Council stipulates that around 25–33% of an undergraduate medical student's teaching programme should be comprised of student chosen components.² The emphasis of the SSC is to enable students to gain exposure to a diversity of settings and a wide range of topics, providing an opportunity to study particular areas of medicine, science and health-related subjects in depth. During the programme students can develop various skills and improve their knowledge base.

The SSC programme in year three of the course at BSMS was initially divided into four blocks and is now two blocks of study. Each block runs for eight weeks with each session per week lasting three hours. The students make their initial choices of SSCs in the early spring of the previous academic year and are required to express preferences to choose from a variety of 30 SSCs. Tutors are invited to provide a short overall description of the content of the SSC and the learning outcomes to enable the students to make informed choices (see Box 1 and Box 2).

For the assessment of the SSC module there is a choice of making a presentation or a 1,500-word written essay, which is marked by the SSC tutor. Students are invited to complete an evaluation for the holistic medicine module (see Box 3).

Box 1

SSC description

The sessions will be supportive and fun. You will learn self-help skills including relaxation, visualisation and meditation, which will be helpful for yourself as well as patients. You will learn to be more peaceful, positive and compassionate. You will begin to appreciate that how you feel and behave with a patient is central to the consultation. We will be discussing how remaining positive and calm makes you more confident in dealing with difficult situations in clinical practice. The learning will be experiential and reflective.

Learning holistic medicine

Much of the content and process of the holistic healing module drew on the training manual *Values in health care- a spiritual approach* which is designed for healthcare professionals to explore how best to apply core values in healthcare.³ The approach uses reflective practice and appreciative

inquiry and practises active listening. Meditation and visualisation is used and creativity and playfulness is encouraged.

The emphasis of this module is on the self-care of the students and the five dimensions of holistic medical care:

- a whole-person approach – considering mind, body and spirit
- self-care – developing resilience
- humane care – practising compassionately
- integrating complementary therapies – using effective approaches
- sustainability – thinking globally, acting locally.

Box 2

Learning outcomes

The overall aim of this SSC is to gain an insight into practising medicine holistically. In particular, by the end of the SSC, students will have begun to:

- understand the holistic approach
- learn self-help techniques – relaxation, visualisation, meditation
- understand the therapeutic relationship
- communicate and co-operate effectively
- appreciate core values
- use reflective learning
- develop a positive attitude.

There are eight to twelve students in each group. The group is facilitated as a learning community where everyone learns from each other's experience. Conditions of respect, honesty, openness and confidentiality are agreed by the group, which creates a safe place to share experiences. Discussions on set questions or issues start with a period of reflection on one's own, followed by sharing with a partner or small group, and then feeding back to the whole group for discussion. The sessions are flexible to meet the needs of each group with a general theme for each session, which is described below. BSMS asks all students to complete an evaluation questionnaire and the holistic medicine module scored in the top three of third year SSCs. For the tutors and their own benefit they are asked to reflect on some questions at the completion of the course. See Box 3.

Week 1 Introduction, learning together

The principles of a learning community and reflective practice is explained to the group. Although the students will have read the description of the module they are encouraged as a group to set their own aims and objectives and to consider what makes a group successful.

Each session starts with introductions and sharing any personal or work related issue they wish to raise. During sessions stretch breaks are encouraged. If it is a sunny day we have a longer break walking down to the beach on Brighton seafront. This emphasises the value of informally

getting to know colleagues and taking time out of a busy schedule to exercise and relax.

The second half of this session is exploring, through discussion, the questions 'what is health, healing, spirituality and holistic care?'

'This teaching technique made me feel more confident in speaking up and voicing my ideas and opinions. I learnt more about myself and how I interact within a group.' RN

'I gained a greater insight into how I view health and healing. For example before this session I had not fully reflected on the fact that I saw healing as a journey and that health was a very subjective entity.' LT

Week 2 Values

A question that is used to start reflecting and discussing values is, 'Who do you admire most and what are their special qualities?' Some choose famous people and others people that they know. By asking what are their own special qualities the students are able to identify the values that are relevant to their professional role and the values that make a good doctor.

The idea of 'advanced communication skills' is introduced; that is, sitting with a partner without interrupting, being non-judgemental and fully attentive. This is practised in pairs, taking turns speaking for five minutes while the other listens. If there is silence they are instructed not to prompt, but 'sit with' the silence. The topic is usually, 'Why do you want to study medicine?' They then have a chance to reflect on the process of the dialogue and how it felt both as a talker and listener. Often this produces a key insight into the quality of being present for another, and the therapeutic effect that can have.

'In the group we discussed people we admire and why, and it became clearly evident that I admire the qualities that I aspire to possess such as determination, optimism, openmindedness; and it is these qualities that will allow me to become a good doctor as it is these qualities that define who I am.' TY

'The most important realisation I have is the possible application of attentive listening for helping patients.' LA

Week 3 Positive thinking and meditation

Encouraging positive thinking borrows from the appreciative inquiry (AI) method, which is primarily used in organisational development that focuses on what works well, rather than on eliminating what it does badly.⁴ AI is discussed and how it can be helpful on a personal level and for communicating with patients.

Sometimes the group will visit a meditation centre or invite a hypnotherapist practitioner to discuss and practice meditation and visualisation. However each session is started with a minute's silence and time is spent in some of the sessions reflecting on how each of us finds inner peace and how that can be achieved in our busy lives.

'I waste time with waste thoughts. I realised that I do not have to know everything: it is a kind of lack of confidence wanting to. I bought a meditation CD and

scheduled time to listen to it. There is more to life than just studying medicine. JW

'The most important learning has been how essential it is to look after oneself and meditation has helped me do this.' AV

Week 4 Self-esteem and support

At the beginning of each session we share in the group what kind of week everyone had. They are encouraged to focus on what went well and what they enjoyed in the previous week. On one occasion a student talked about how difficult it had been when a patient she was caring for had died. She felt she could share her feelings, and the group were very supportive.

An exercise that is used is a series of questions about the attitudes of a self-confident person towards certain situations. The individual answers were then discussed in small groups before sharing with the whole group. A similar follow-on exercise invites participants to name two values a self-confident person would have in dealing with different types of people. This encourages them to identify their qualities of self-confidence and the values they may wish to develop.

After discussing again the skills of listening they share with a partner a situation when they felt supported and when they supported someone else. They are encouraged again to identify the specific values that are demonstrated. Finally various scenarios are given and they are asked whom they turned to for support in these situations. This leads onto an open discussion of what kind of support they have and would need to develop during their medical career.

'I learnt not to confuse self-confidence with arrogance. You can be self-confident, believing in your own abilities and still be compassionate, understanding and honest.' NR

'I found it difficult to remember a time when I had supported someone, not because I am not supportive but because I do not acknowledge it.' SB

Week 5 Yoga

This has become a regular feature of the module where the group go to a centre and have an hour-and-a-half session of yoga. It is a practical session of relaxation and stretching. Usually several students have tried yoga but for most students it is a new experience. Often they are surprised how much they enjoy the afternoon.

'I gained an understanding how to release our physical body and quieten the mind and how beneficial such relaxation can be.' JT

'It made me aware of how simple things can help you feel better.' LD

Week 6 Creativity

There is not one session just for creative activities – it is interspersed within each session depending on the topic being addressed. It is very helpful to get students out of their 'thinking mind' to being more intuitive and creative. One tool I have used more recently is creative writing



which is a way of writing freely without too much thought. They are instructed to write quickly, without any concern for spelling or punctuation, and to write whatever comes to them without stopping for 3–5 minutes at a time. They then read what they have written, and take turns to share with the group if they wish. There's often some initial resistance but once they get the hang of it they really appreciate it. It can lead to a poetry writing session and can be helpful in writing their assessment essay. Some of their essays have been published in the *Journal of Holistic Healthcare*.⁵

Drawing with crayons and pencils often brings memories of primary school. One subject I choose is, 'Draw how you see yourself in five years time'. Pictures of beaches, forests, big suns, happy families, and small places of work; the result can be revealing and insightful. Sometimes we have an activity of creating a montage in small groups out of old magazines and other times we play games and even dance. When I couldn't attend one session I asked the group to plan an outing for the afternoon. They soon organised a grand picnic, making cakes and sandwiches and playing games on the beach.

Week 7 Visit to complementary centre

This has also become a regular session in the module where the students spend an afternoon at a natural health centre in the village where I practise.⁶ The centre is closed for the afternoon and the therapists offer their therapies to the students. These include massage, reflexology, Reiki healing, Shiatsu, nutrition and sports therapy. All the treatments are free, which is an indication of the therapists' commitment to teaching. It is good for the students to experience the treatments and talk to complementary practitioners, but mostly they enjoy being pampered.

'The highlight of the course for me was trying some of the complementary therapies.' AD

Week 8 Sustainable healthcare

During discussions we try to look at public health issues and the impact the environment has on health and that healthcare has on the environment.



One exercise we do in small groups is to imagine they are working in an underdeveloped country and have been given £100,000 to spend on healthcare. This always raises interesting issues on providing resources or using the funds for health education and, importantly, who to consult about setting the priorities.

Discussion

All the students to a greater or lesser degree find the medical course exhausting and stressful yet had little instruction how to deal with their own stress. It will not be lack of academic ability, motivation, or application that may cause them to drop out of a medical career, but the inability to deal with stress. The university may provide mentoring and counselling, but there is no system or ethos of supporting students through their daily exposure to others' suffering.

Box 3

Students' personal reflective questions

- How would you describe holistic medicine to a friend or colleague?
- Can you identify what makes a group of students work well together?
- What have you learnt from the SSC that you will put into clinical practice?
- What have you learnt about yourself?
- What new skills have you learnt?
- What was the highlight of the SSC for you?
- What are your qualities that will make you a good doctor?
- What are the qualities that will sustain you through medical training?
- What specific measures will you take to reduce stress through your medical training?
- What suggestions do you have that would improve the course on holistic medicine?

The purpose of the module is to expose medical students to a holistic way of practising medicine with an emphasis on caring for oneself. They took readily to the learning style of facilitated group work and a learning community. Their journal entries were considered and insightful showing they understood reflective practice. They were very open to learning about how they could cope better by learning relaxation, meditation and just having fun. They also began to appreciate how important having a supportive network is. Students commented how useful small peer groups are and appreciated that practising active listening skills is important for themselves and patients. Hopefully this article will inspire other tutors to run similar courses and for medical schools to integrate the principals of holistic care into medical education using this model of facilitated learning in training.

Each group is unique with differing needs and expectations yet they are all altruistic, enthusiastic and motivated students who need to be nurtured to allow them to thrive and become competent, compassionate and coping doctors.

'Raising the awareness of the role of holism has taught me that not only do I impact on the patients but also they impact on me. To this end I have a responsibility to myself, and to others, to ensure that I nurture the most precious and finite healing resource I have – myself.' AC

'I found the sessions very warming and allowed me to separate myself from the hustle of the week. I decided I need better time management and organisation and set time aside to have fun.' JT

'I did not know that the BHMA existed. I think that the healthcare system would provide a more complete service to patients if more doctors took some of their values on board.' TR

'It has been the first time since being at the medical school which has made me take more notice of myself and be more aware of my feelings and beliefs.' RN

Acknowledgement

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References

- 1 Brown C (2008) Doctors' health matters – learning to care for yourself. *Journal of holistic healthcare* 5 (2): 32–26.
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- 4 Cooperrider D, Sorensen JP, Whitney D, Yaeger T (2000) *Appreciative inquiry: rethinking human organization toward a positive theory of change*. Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing.
- 5 See www.bhma.org/pages/students.php (accessed 4 November 2012).
- 6 See www.circleofhealth.co.uk (accessed 4 November 2012).