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Preclinical Curricular Changes to Address Sustainable Healthcare Education in Psychiatry

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To the Editor:

This letter presents a pilot project integrating education content on climate change impacts on mental health into the core psychiatry curriculum for preclinical medical students at a public university medical school.

Sustainable healthcare education has been defined as “education about the impact of climate change and ecosystem alterations on health and the impact of the healthcare industry on the aforementioned, is vital to prevention of adverse health outcomes due to the changing climate and environment” [1]. Many health groups, including the American Medical Association, and medical student groups have called for education on health threats of climate change [2, 3]. Furthermore, a recent survey of medical students’ attitudes indicates the majority believe the current sustainable healthcare education to be insufficient preparation for what they will face in their careers [4]. A recent study evaluating the integration of sustainable healthcare education into core curricula has identified the pre-clinical years of medical training as the optimal time for such teaching [2].

We integrated sustainable healthcare education into the preexisting preclinical course in neuroscience/psychiatry. In our course, psychiatry faculty members have responsibility for lecturing and developing materials for their individual topics (e.g., anxiety disorder). After reviewing the entire curriculum, we reached out to specific faculty members and offered sustainable healthcare education content materials that could be conveniently integrated into preexisting materials, including case examples. Faculty members thus quickly became content experts for sustainable healthcare education in their area. This process also allowed faculty members to

update their materials with only modest effort. The changes made were successful. We have responded to medical student requests for curricular change and provided faculty with manageable ways to add important content to their lectures.

We successfully integrated climate change impacts on mental health into the required preclinical neuroscience/psychiatry course with the following steps. First, we created specific learning objectives for sustainable healthcare education. Second, we completed a systematic review of existing course content with identification of key core areas for inclusion of sustainable healthcare education material. In our case, these areas included the topics of anxiety disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, social determinants of health, wellbeing, psychopharmacology, and problem-solving case discussions. Third, we engaged in outreach to faculty responsible for core areas to elicit engagement. Fourth, we provided specific materials, including slides and case examples.

The targeted faculty were all successful in integrating sustainable healthcare education materials into their core areas. Anecdotal comments from both students and faculty were uniformly positive.

Potential areas for future expansion of sustainable healthcare education in our curriculum include assessment of our intervention into student evaluation with specific targeted questions; more formal assessment of faculty acceptance of sustainable healthcare education material into core areas; further refinements to the lecture series, including expansion of learning objectives (e.g., adding coping strategies and skills for emotional resiliency to manage climate-related anxiety and distress); review of the written lecture notes with a plan to standardize sustainable healthcare education content across topics; faculty development by orientation of all faculty to learning objectives for sustainable healthcare education, as well as improve faculty knowledge and content; development of new learning activities that are elective with opportunities for student-driven scholarly activities, such as innovative writing of opinion essays, creation of educational videos; and an

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advanced elective course of sustainable healthcare education in mental health.

We are pleased to describe our positive experience with this model of this curricular change. We encourage others to include sustainable healthcare education materials in their pre-clinical neuroscience/psychiatry medical student curriculum as well. This can help with the mission to develop a climate-literate health workforce that can meet the challenges facing the health community.

Declarations

Disclosures On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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