FOSTERING SOCIALLY-CONSCIOUS CLINICIANS

Addressing Health Inequity Through the Vermont Integrated Curriculum.

By Michelle Bookless
Scientific advancements such as genome sequencing, mRNA vaccines and point-of-care ultrasound have saved countless lives. But new technologies are only as successful as the practitioners who use them. In order to reduce the incidence of disease and improve health outcomes, particularly in historically underserved populations, the clinicians and systems that deliver patient care must also evolve.

In an article published in May 2021 by the Association of American Medical Colleges, titled “Medical Schools Overhaul Curricula to Fight Inequities,” Stacy Weiner notes that if medical schools worked in weaving health equity intricately throughout their curricula, “the physician of the future will look very different.”

In 2017, Samuel Epstein, M.D., Christina Dawson, M.D., Reed Hauser, M.D., Elizabeth Lynch, M.D., and Raghav Goyal, M.D., began medical school as members of the Larner College of Medicine Class of 2021. Now, they are part of the generation of physicians Weiner referenced in her article. During their four years at Larner, they worked with faculty to incorporate social medicine and health equity education throughout Larner’s Vermont Integrated Curriculum. These curricular elements are now being formalized as the Social Medicine Curriculum (SMC). A report by Larner faculty and medical students, recently published in BMC Medical Education, details the burgeoning SMC at Larner and its three core components: (1) a strong series of related conversations regarding social medicine topics delivered in the weekly first-year, small group longitudinal discussion course (PCR); (2) social medicine content embedded in foundational science courses (including sixteen) ethics sessions; and (3) cross-curricular integration of social medicine content...

The Social Justice Coalition (SJC) Book Club began as a small group of medical students in the Class of 2021 meeting to discuss historical and current injustices in health care and medicine spurred by texts such as “The Fire Next Time” by James Baldwin and “Illness as a Metaphor” by susan sontag’s illness as a metaphor, one of the first books to introduce the concept of “autoimmune” in medical language. The book club was founded by Eldakar-Hein who worked with Epstein, Dawson, Brach, and Finnie to initially link social determinants of health topics more clearly with PCR sessions. Now, this work is in the midst of its next evolutionary leap with Berns at the helm.

In January 2020, Berns became PCR course director, and in the middle of a pandemic that brought the broken pieces of the American health care system into full view, he seized on the theme of structural change and began to reconfigure PCR once again. PCR is now delivered in five modules. “Becoming a Physician,” “Humanity” and “Society and Medicine” are taught during the first year; “Advocacy and Social Justice” is addressed during the second year; and during their third year, students engage in the final modules—“The Medical Culture and Resilience.”

In the first three modules, students explore topics like self-identity, the burden of individual trauma, and the concept of implicit bias. As they enter the second year, Berns and course professors focus primarily on advocacy, asking the students to consider questions such as “What is a physician’s role as an advocate—for their patients, their colleagues, and their communities?” and “Why should or shouldn’t social justice be taught in medical school?” During their third year, the final PCR module challenges students to find their meaning in medicine. They learn how to approach situations of moral distress and investigate the “hidden curriculum,” which encompasses the “implicit messages about values, norms and attitudes” that students learn outside of the classroom, says Berns. As he continues to evolve PCR, Berns says he’s committed to increased training for faculty. “A lot of medical school faculty around the country have recognized their own shortcomings in the areas of social justice and health equity. We’re hearing them say, ‘This isn’t an area I got trained in when I was in medical school,’ and ‘I want to learn more,’” he says. “I appreciate that Larner faculty are open, eager, and curious to learn.”

Medical Ethics: Undoing historical injustices hinges in part on open, honest discussion about the historical and cultural roots of injustice, says Timothy Lahey, M.D., M.M.S., professor of medicine and director...
of clinical ethics at UVM Medical Center. Giving medical students the opportunity to have those conversations early and often fosters an awareness that stands to help change the system. "The weekly ethics sessions consist of pre-reading and a quiz, followed by in-class discussion. Lahey frequently links the sessions to current events, encouraging students to apply their understanding of medical ethics to an ever-changing world. For instance, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, Lahey added a session on resilience. "I wanted the students to see how resilience relates intimately to ethics," he says. "If people are feeling under fire, under-appreciated, and sleep-deprived, we know that they are much more likely to do something unethical.”

Medical ethics is tightly tied to health equity work, says Lahey. "It helps equity work have nuance by showing the full set of complex values that inform and even transcend justice. That guards against the human temptation to approach any value, including the value of fairness, too simplistically," he says.

Healing Resistance: A Radically Different Response to Harm
By Kazi Haga
Reviewed by Nikkole Turgeon ’22
Healing Resistance details author Kazi Haga’s life and training in the nonviolent legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Haga encourages the reader to envision a path towards the “Beloved Community,” as King described by explaining the Six Principles of Nonviolence and how readers can take steps to incorporate them into their lives. This book should be required reading for everyone as it provides context and a framework for Kingian principles, which have historically been whitewashed and often eliminated from traditional teaching about Dr. King.

Social Medicine Theme of the Week
"Our current system is excellently equipped to deal with a faceless collection of symptoms," says Erik Zhang ’24, "but once we begin layering in the intersecting components of race, gender, mental health, language, and weight, to name a few of the big categories, in addition to the stigmas and privileges carried by each one, we lose the ability to appropriately address the issues being presented.”

It’s this understanding that motivated five Larner students to create the Social Justice Coalition in 2017. This group helped to drive creation of the formalized social medicine curriculum, which was piloted during the 2018-19 academic year. After its founding by Epstein, Dawson, Hauser, Goyal and Lynch, the social medicine curriculum continued to evolve with involvement from Class of 2022 medical students Richard Brach, Sheridan Flinn, and Nikkole Turgeon; Class of 2023’s Erisandra Kneer, and most recently, Class of 2024’s Erik Zhang and Tyler Hardt. Within the social medicine curriculum, the student-driven Social Medicine Theme of the Week (SMTW) weaves discussions of social determinants of health throughout all courses. SMTW themes are based on the seven learning objectives of the social medicine curriculum, including topics like appraisal of the intersection of social determinants with marginalized populations, histories, perspectives, and experiences; synthesis of the United States’ role in the “global health narrative;” and tools and strategies to advocate for lasting social change. Themes align with relevant content taught during the pre-clinical foundational science courses and PCR. Examples include “The Genocide of Race,” presented during the Foundations of Clinical Sciences course, when students learn about genetics and “Housing and Water,” during the Attacks and Defenses course, in which students learn about toxicology.

Although SMTW has helped raise student awareness of social determinants of health and their impact on health outcomes, the team has created a survey to gauge the level of success so far and guide further improvements to the curriculum. According to the paper that Goyal, Dawson, Epstein, Brach, and Flinn published, future goals include further integration of SMTW into pre-clinical and clinical training, faculty training, and assessment through student reflection and patient responses. "Today’s system dedicates huge amounts of money, resources, and brain power to creating technology and medications, often at the expense of ground-level, socially-minded patient care," says Hardt. "Things are changing, especially at Larner, but there needs to be a more deliberate shift in mindset for the ‘physicians of tomorrow.’"