

Implementation of a Compassionate Presence Curriculum in Residency

Discussion of How the Problem was Identified and Explored: As part of the ACGME competency of Professionalism, Internal Medicine residents are expected to “demonstrate compassion, integrity and respect for others”. In fact, compassion, empathy, integrity and ethics are a focus of several the Next Accreditation System Reporting Milestones. However, existing studies suggest that while medical knowledge and practical skills increase during residency, empathy, ethical judgment, patient-centeredness, and work engagement, often decline in response to increased stress. Moreover, a substantial number of physicians experience burnout symptoms during residency training. We hypothesized that implementing a Compassionate Presence curriculum designed to teach the skills necessary to be comfortable with and to maintain compassionate presence in all patient and interpersonal interactions would decrease symptoms of burnout and improve empathy, ethical judgment and patient-centered.

IMESO, in cooperation with the Internal Medicine Residency Program that is chaired by Dr. William Davis, discussed the need to include values education in the residency program and decided to pilot a program with a group of categorical residents. Members of the IMESO Educational Team, in cooperation with selected physicians, developed a compassionate presence curriculum that consists of seven 2-hour sessions. The curriculum was piloted with 12 residents.

After an introduction session, each subsequent session included a short didactic segment related to one of six virtues—courage, wisdom, temperance, justice, humanity, and transcendence—and their strengths. The session also included a case study of the virtue being taught, experiential exercises which included role-play, and a debriefing segment that included discussions of speaking from one’s heart and experience, the art of listening and maintaining compassionate relationship, and reflection on mentor’s behaviors for each virtue. During the debrief/discussion, residents had the opportunity to learn the value of self-reflection as caregivers and to explore the compassionate skills that their mentors model.

Residents were encouraged to keep a gratitude diary and to journal about how the concepts being taught arise as part of the physician/patient relationship and other interactions.

Implications/Generalizability of the Innovation: Feedback from the pilot clearly demonstrates a gap in knowledge related to these virtues and a need for formal training to develop professional skills necessary to demonstrate compassionate presence.