

## **Triggering the Art of Written Reflection in Medical Students**

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### **Introduction**

Critical reflection is an essential skill for learning in the health professions. Reflective practice has been shown to lead to improved patient care. Reflective practitioners have the ability to stand back and observe their behavior and actions, and use this learning to improve practice. Skills of reflection provide deep insights to students and must be taught early to medical students to make their learning experience more meaningful.

### **Summary**

The Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Sevagram is a rural medical school in the Wardha district in Maharashtra in Central India. The school was started in 1969 with a community-oriented teaching approach with the primary purpose of sensitizing medical students to the problems of rural India. The school has pioneered several curricular innovations which have gone on to become part of government policy.

One of the school's major curricular innovations is the village adoption initiative where each class of medical students adopts a village in the Wardha district. Quite early in the course, undergraduate medical students stay in their adopted village with the community for two weeks during the Social Service Camp. The camp is organized by the Department of Community Medicine and all other clinical departments provide their free OPD services to the villagers during the course of the camp. Students are provided a community immersion experience during the camp. Each student is allotted three to five families with whom they interact with through structured visits. During these visits, students conduct exercises on different health topics in the community context. Each visit has a different focus such as hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, immunization, etc. After the camp, students continue to follow up with their adopted families for the next three and a half years during monthly visits.

In order to make this community immersion experience more purposeful and powerful, we taught medical students how to write layered reflections.

### **What Was Done**

A two-hour interactive session on reflection and reflective practice was conducted for students a week before they left for the Social Service Camp to their adopted village. Students were introduced to these concepts and the need to make this a part of their learning. During the course of these sessions samples of good reflective writing were shared and discussed. Students were introduced to the concept of layered reflections. They were encouraged to be observant during the course of the social service camp and write their reflections daily. Specific challenges of reflective writing in the medical field such as confidentiality with patient data and

sensitivity was discussed. During the camp, this was supplemented with online learning forums where students were encouraged to share their reflective writing with teachers and peers. During the camp and later, faculty provided feedback to students on their reflections. We later conducted focus group discussions with students to learn about their experience with writing reflections.

## **What We Learned**

After a few initial hiccups, the students warmed up to the idea of writing reflections. Writing did not come easily to everyone, but the excitement of listening to stories from their peers inspired most students to write. Writing reflections helped the students to focus on the task at hand and observe their surroundings differently. Journal writing stimulated them to think about issues beyond disease. Samples of reflective writing showed that the experience altered the students' understanding of the cultural, economic, and social context of health. When asked how the camp altered their learning, one of the students wrote:

*"We are taught a lot of statistical facts about health, disparity, and inequity. But nothing prepares you enough when you land in the village and see how people actually live. It comes as a cultural shock at first. And then slowly you learn to see how people find happiness in less. It is an experience which changes you for life."*

The immersion experience clearly made a profound impact on students who came from urban settings. Some samples of reflective writing read as follows:

*"I never realized how privileged a life I was leading. I will never complain again. I've seen how people live contented lives with so little material needs."*

*"Once you have seen the circumstances in which people live you cannot but weigh your words and think twice before you recommend or prescribe something."*

Students also found this exercise useful in clarifying their own purpose of choosing a medical career. Beyond theoretical knowledge, students became more aware of the skills they might need to acquire in their clinical years. Their focus of learning seemed to shift. As one student wrote:

*"Knowing something from a textbook is one thing. Trying to counsel people in the community to follow what is right needs far too much skill and even more persistence. We realized how difficult counseling was and how much more we needed to learn."*

Samples of reflective writing captured their awareness of the socioeconomic, political dimensions and dynamics that affect health. Final year students said that the social service camp completely altered their clinical approach compared to their peers in other medical schools. As one student said:

*"Our entire approach is different. They see a case of anemia and think about the treatment. Our mind automatically processes the cultural background and socioeconomic status. We think of prevention rather than curative aspects first."*

Clearly, introducing students to reflective writing has opened up the way they view health and disease. It also inculcates professionalism in their manner. Teachers will need to periodically stimulate them to write reflections regularly, review their work, and provide feedback to make a more meaningful impact to their learning.

## **Conclusion**

Introducing students to the art of reflection early in their course alters the way in which they approach their patients. Reflective practice is a powerful agent for change which must be explored further and initiated early in the curriculum.

## **Author bios**

**Dr Anshu, MD, DNB, MNAMS, MHPE**, works as Professor in the Department of Pathology at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Sevagram. She has an interest in health professions education. She was awarded the Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellowship, and FAIMER Fellowships from CMCL-FAIMER Regional Institute Ludhiana and the FAIMER Institute Philadelphia. She was a recipient of the International Fellowship in Medical Education in 2012. She is actively engaged in faculty development through training workshops. She has designed and conducted workshops for both students and faculty in areas such as developing good study skills, mentoring, curriculum design, assessment, reflective practice, and communication skills. She has several publications in this area. She is currently Secretary of the Academy of Health Professions Education (India).

**Dr Subodh Sharan Gupta, MD (Pediatrics), MD (MCH), DNB (SPM), MNAMS**, works as Professor and Head of the Department of Community Medicine at the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Sevagram. As a medical teacher, he has been actively involved in implementing an innovative community-based medical education program for undergraduate students. He was also instrumental in initiating e-learning and an initiative for promotion of undergraduate research in his institute. He has been part of team developing a number of innovative community-based strategies and programs in the areas of home-based management of childhood illness, early childhood development, and community monitoring of health. He is a recipient of FAIMER Fellowship from the PSG-FAIMER Regional Institute, Coimbatore.