Publishing, medical students and two pinches of inspiration: the recipe for success

Letter

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Medicine is a competitive field, where postgraduate and residency programs are scarce and highly demanded. A key element taken in consideration for the admission to these programs is the number of papers the applicant has published.¹ Although nowadays many students are involved in research projects, few publish in scholarly journals.²

For instance, a recent article explored the status of the teaching methodology and medical student research statistics in a South Indian Medical Institute.³ A central finding was that medical students considered that innovative teaching methods and discussions should be an important part of the teaching methodology. Furthermore, students felt that research and clinical skills training should also be implemented during their medical formation. Nonetheless, 75.43% of the surveyed students believed that there was not enough guidance or encouragement to conduct research. Consequently, although not directly measured, the student's publishing rate might also be low. This is a worrying situation that demands a coordinated response from both students and teachers.

From a medical student viewpoint, doing research and publishing is an exciting but time-consuming process. A strategy to help palliate this dissonance would be to encourage students to publish the written components, or final extended academic assignments, that they produce for some curricular subjects (Figure 1).⁴ This could range from the documentation of classroom activities to more thoroughly elaborated reviews of basic or clinical topics.

For instance, the authors of the present letter had the chance to collaborate in a systematic review about iron deficiency anaemia.⁵ The later started as a final assignment and was, after an exciting editorial process, accepted for publication. We

believe these types of experiences are valuable, since they encourage the student to directly apply what he or she has learned in class. Moreover, publishing is a powerful strategy to teach abilities that are not part of traditional research courses, such as communicating with the editors and answering the reviewers.⁴ In addition, medical teachers should also actively encourage their students to do research and publish, since writing an article demands a careful consideration of the previously published literature, which is a central step in the practice of evidence-based medicine.

A helpful recommendation would be to work alongside local scientific journals or student journals, since they often seek for the so-called ‘back to the basics’ articles. These are mini-reviews of molecular, physiological or clinical topics, and represent a potential opportunity for students to publish.

In summary, publishing is a unique experience that both ensures the achievement of significant learning and strengthens the student’s curriculum. It is the job of medical teachers to apply this new approach, and others like it, to help students transform into the health professionals and researchers our society deserves.

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Figure 1

Figure 1. Flowchart depicting the path from the elaboration of a written class project to publication.