Is there a role for peer review in performance appraisal of medical students?

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In 2002, Epstein and Hundert undertook a review of all medical literature that studied the reliability and validity of measures of the clinical or professional competence of clinicians, medical students and residents to consider current assessment formats for doctors and trainees. They noted that current means of assessment test core knowledge and skills reliably, with the most commonly used assessment methods identified as: multi-choice examinations to evaluate factual knowledge and abstract problem solving, standardised patient assessments of physical examination and technical and communication skills. However, Epstein and Hundert also observed that assessment formats under-emphasise some important domains, including professionalism.

Improving the sensitivity of the assessment of professional competence

Peer review is a system of review that uses reviewers who are the professional equals of an individual or group of people who are also responsible for directing or participating in an activity. The process of peer review depends on the context and may be structured or unstructured. It can involve an individual or group exchange of information, and may occur spontaneously or in a planned setting. In a clinical context, the process of peer review is concerned usually with clinical practice improvement. In other contexts, peer review is used as a performance appraisal tool.

The notion of measuring personal and professional behaviour by ‘listening to our students’ is not new. Dr J. J. Cohen, past president of the Association of American Medical Colleges, considered that there are a number of substantive arguments in support of an active peer review programme for students. Peer review prepares students for their future professional responsibilities: it highlights the value that is placed on professional behaviour, allows students to gain a unique insight validating the judgements of supervisors and communicates to junior colleagues a respect for each others’ integrity.

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Implementation of peer review in the Australian National University Medical School curriculum

The ideas explored by Dr Cohen are being adopted currently by the Australian National University Medical School (ANUMS). ANUMS conducts a postgraduate medical degree course. It is a new medical school which accepted its first students in 2004. Peer review has been introduced as a key measure of personal and professional performance and is applied annually throughout the course.

The concept of assessment of professional competence is introduced to medical students at the beginning of their course. Students also consider performance appraisal and the place of peer review, including the assessment of personal and professional behaviour as it might apply to medical students and junior doctors at the end of their first year. During this process they also reflect on the criteria included in the ‘Standards of professional behaviour guidelines’ that apply to medical students attending ANUMS, and through an anonymous voting process conducted during a group activity agree to the criteria that they will use as part of their peer review process.

The first formal assessment occurs towards the end of their first year. At ANUMS students rate others based on their problem-based learning group. The rating occurs online and the students are blinded to each other; the criteria are assessed against a five-point rating scale. While no demonstrated resistance to completing the ratings has been observed, a small number of student reviewers rate all colleagues at the highest score. These students are advised separately to reflect on their approach to peer review and are made aware that rating peers blindly at the highest point of the scale is not a satisfactory approach to peer review.

As anticipated, the overall results identify only a small number of students who require counselling. It is interesting to note, however, that the process has brought to light matters of a personal and professional nature that had not been identified previously by faculty staff.

The benefits are significant. It allows students to share their private assessments about the professional development of their peers and prepares them for their future professional responsibilities, highlights the value that is placed on professional behaviour, provides the opportunity to gain a unique insight into validating the judgements of supervisors and communicates to medical students a respect for each others’ integrity. It also provides the faculty with another formal early-warning mechanism to identify and remEDIATE students who are displaying difficulties with their personal and professional behaviour.

Summary

Personal and professional behaviour is now recognised as a core competence for medical students, junior medical officers and medical specialists. However, the assessment tools that are currently in use have inherent weaknesses. It is proposed that these weaknesses should be acknowledged and that a new tool, peer review, should be added to improve both reliability and validity.

The Australian National University Medical School has introduced peer review successfully as a performance appraisal tool; however, it has been recognised that this has an effect on curriculum development and implementation. In particular, students must understand the basic construct of peer review and appreciate the underlying values that form the core of personal and professional competence. At the same time there is a small administrative overhead to manage the process.

Nevertheless, the benefits are significant. It allows students to share their private assessments about the professional development of their peers and prepares them for their future professional responsibilities, highlights the value that is placed on professional behaviour, provides the opportunity to gain a unique insight into validating the judgements of supervisors and communicates to medical students a respect for each others’ integrity. It also provides the faculty with another formal early-warning mechanism to identify and remEDIATE students who are displaying difficulties with their personal and professional behaviour.

REFERENCES
