Incorporating Formal Nutrition Education into a Medical School Curriculum: A Student-Initiated Lecture Series

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Introduction

A 2013 survey of 133 US medical schools found that 71% of programs continue to fall short in providing the minimum recommended 25 hours of nutrition education.[1] Poor or inadequate nutrition is the root cause of many common diseases and exacerbates the disease progression of many acute and chronic ailments. Without adequate training in the basic tenets of nutrition and the skills needed to provide effective nutrition counseling to patients, graduates of medical schools are ill-equipped to assist their patients in making necessary life-style changes. Prior research has shown that providing medical students with education in nutrition translates to positive clinical outcomes.[2] As the United States continues to face increasing rates of chronic diseases directly related to poor nutrition, it has become critical to address the lack of evidence-based, practical nutrition education.[3,4,5]

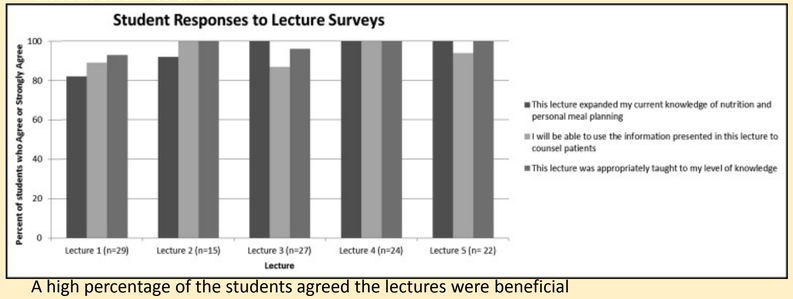
Methods

A student-led nutrition lecture series with the aim of instituting a sustainable nutrition education model was created at Wake Forest School of Medicine. A total of five 1-hour evidence-based lectures were created by students along with a faculty mentor, and surveys were conducted before and after the lectures to assess feedback. The lectures were:

- **Introduction to the Importance of Nutrition in Medicine, Macronutrients, and the Basics of Meal Planning**
- **The Role of Nutrition in Preventing and Treating Chronic Disease**
- **The Health and Nutritional Benefits of Herbs and Spices**
- **Intuitive Eating and Fad Diets**
- **The Power of Chocolate, Coffee, and Other Foods**

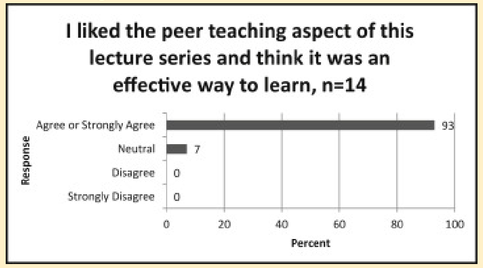
Results

Figure 1. Students were asked after each nutrition lecture to rate the effectiveness of the task



A high percentage of the students agreed the lectures were beneficial

Figure 2. After the lecture series students were asked to comment on the peer teaching modes



A majority of students favored this approach

- On the basis of survey data from Wake Forest School of Medicine, 85% of the 65 participating students in their clinical years of education are not confident in their preparedness to counsel patients about nutrition topics. Likewise, the majority of respondents (86%) stated they would be interested in more practical evidence-based nutrition education.
- Students agreed that each lecture expanded their knowledge, that they would be able to use this information to counsel patients, and that the material was taught on their level.

Conclusions

- Students surveyed at Wake Forest School of Medicine felt ill-equipped to counsel patients about nutrition and expressed a desire to learn about nutrition in relation to their future clinical practice. This highlights the need for more evidence-based training within US medical schools.
- The students responded favorably to the peer teaching format of the nutrition classes and found it to be an effective way to learn nutritional science.
- According to surveys administered after the lecture series, many students reported feeling like they can use the information to counsel patients.
- Areas for further investigation include the methods by which formal nutrition education can be implemented into the existing medical student curriculum.

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