First early patient contact for medical students in Prague
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**Background.** Undergraduate medical education in the Czech Republic is currently undergoing extensive changes.

**Objectives.** Since the very beginning of the study we have aimed to introduce mandatory education in general practice at the Second Medical School of Charles University in Prague.

**Methods.** A total of 106 medical students were divided into pairs; three pairs of students were assigned to one GP (trainer) who chose suitable families for them to visit after lectures in communication skills. The students met their trainers again after the visits, and 1 week of family placement was concluded by seminars that involved small groups of students led by assistant lecturers of the Institute of General Practice of the Postgraduate Medical School.

**Results and conclusions.** Early patient contact for medical students proved to be a good method of starting training in communication skills and for helping to understand the patient as a human being. Students evaluated highly their lecture notes and seminars for small groups as ways of preparing them for their future tasks. The attention that the medical students gave to their new subject, and their interest in continuing the seminars and visits of ‘their’ families, showed that the Family Placement project had a positive response.

**Keywords.** Communication skills, family placement, man and patient, undergraduate education.

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**Introduction**

The current changes in society, science and research are naturally reflected in the requirements for education, as well as in the demands placed on students. The qualities of the physician of the 21st century were defined by the Edinburgh Summit on education several years ago. Many medical schools that have to date preserved conventional methods of training are presently seeking to modify their curricula, using the summit’s documents as guidelines, so as to prepare their students to meet the challenges that they are bound to face in the years to come.

The Edinburgh Summit, WHO and most western-European universities are surprisingly in agreement as regards the priorities of the physician of the future.

Increasing emphasis is being placed on effective preventive care, a combination of a scientific approach and a humane attitude to the patient, and adequate communication with the patient. More attention should be given to the medical emergency service, to motivation and to the ability to work with an interest while being aware of the limited resources. As WHO put it, the above goals can be summarized into the real support of GPs/family physicians, who are the closest to the patients, providing general, affordable and continuous medical and rehabilitation care. General practice is thus focused on the individual rather than merely on a disease, and can thus contribute to the education of medical students so that they better understand man’s behaviour in good and bad health. Most western-European universities are currently seeking to guide education in this direction.
Objective and methods

The Prague-based Institute of General Practice of the Postgraduate Medical School gave students of the Second Medical School of Charles University in Prague, based in Motol University Hospital, the opportunity to gain an insight into general practice and to become acquainted with the patient as first-year students. This was accomplished using the method of family placement, which involves visits to the families of the chronically ill.3,4

The medical school incorporated into its curricula for instruction in general practice/family medicine in the first year an initial week of lectures of the discipline proper, psychology and preventive medicine. Arrangements for family placement of 106 medical students were made by the Institute of General Medicine of the Postgraduate Medical School, with effective assistance provided by experienced and previously instructed GPs (trainers) (GP-Ts), who had selected patients with mild conditions who were amiable, cooperative and agreed in advance to visits by medical students.

The students were divided into pairs for visiting the GP-Ts, who provided them with general information about the family. After two visits to the patients, the students returned to their GP-Ts and reported on their experience. In seminars held with psychologists, which preceded the visits, the students had been briefly instructed on the basics of communication skills.5 Textbooks on general practice provided the students with some guidance on how to arrange the visits, and explained the main purpose of the course and the tasks to be accomplished.

The week-long family placement project was also combined with instruction in preventive medicine to make the students aware, from the very start of their study, of the importance of prevention, which should be an integral part of the everyday practice of the physician.

Seminars of the students with assistant lecturers of the Institute of General Practice of the Postgraduate Medical School were the final part of the 1-week course of this new subject. The seminars took the form of workshops in small groups of 11–16 students. Needless to say, the main topic of the seminars was the visit to the first patient. However, informal discussions also addressed the students’ ability to take note of the household and the patient’s appearance, the behaviour of one family member towards the other and their attitudes to health and disease. Also discussed were the topics of essays with which the students were to complete their family placement in the second year of study, after another two visits to the family. Most students were too busy taking notes during the visits and seminars not to miss any potential hints and clues as to the recommended topics to be addressed by their final reports, which were expected to summarize the issues covered in the first and second years of study (‘Family composition’, ‘The relationship to health and disease’, ‘The story of family development’, ‘The rapport of the physician and the patient’, ‘A healthy lifestyle’, and so on.5

Results

In the final seminars of the Family Placement course, lead by assistant lecturers of the Institute of General Practice, the students showed a surprisingly deep social sensitivity, a good eye for the families visited and, in most cases, they also proved an ability to establish communication with their patients. Their presentations, made possible by the informal atmosphere of seminars in small groups, suggested a genuine interest in the questions raised. The students sought to perceive the patient as someone within their own family, with a job, hobbies, personal joys and problems. They come to realize the importance of giving utmost attention to their patients and the need for an ability to empathize with the problems for which the patient confides in the physician. The students were taught, both by psychologists and by the assistant lecturers of the Institute of General Practice, to lead targeted interviews and to be able to listen.

In many cases, the students did not just convey their impressions from the visits but were also able to formulate surprisingly insightful comments and observations on patients’ relationship to life, their environment, health and disease, optimism or pessimism.

The interest shown by first-year students in the introduction of this newly introduced subject, with demands for more frequent seminars and an opportunity to revisit their families, can be regarded as a definitive success of the Family Placement project.

Discussion

The curriculum in the medical schools of Czech universities has mostly retained the conventional nature and education of general practice that appear only marginally and often formally in the final years of study. In the academic year 1996–1997, the Second Medical School of Charles University in Prague, by incorporating general practice/family medicine into its curriculum from the first year of study, has joined other European universities that allow their medical students to get to know patients who are the objects of the life-long study of the physician, before they identify the disease itself.6

The inspiration and courage to try this method of education at the very beginning of the study of medicine at Charles University were sought by workers of the Institute of General Practice of the Postgraduate Medical School in Prague on the basis of successful experience with general practice at UK universities, in particular Sheffield, Leicester and Southampton.6,7
Acknowledgement

Funding for this work was provided by the Tempus international project.

References


