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Defining and Assessing Professional Competence

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Abstract

Context Current assessment formats for physicians and trainees reliably test core knowledge and basic skills. However, they may underemphasize some important domains of professional medical practice, including interpersonal skills, lifelong learning, professionalism, and integration of core knowledge into clinical practice.

Objectives To propose a definition of professional competence, to review current means for assessing it, and to suggest new approaches to assessment.

Data Sources We searched the MEDLINE database from 1966 to 2001 and reference lists of relevant articles for English-language studies of reliability or validity of measures of competence of physicians, medical students, and

residents.

Study Selection We excluded articles of a purely descriptive nature, duplicate reports, reviews, and opinions and position statements, which yielded 195 relevant citations.

Data Extraction Data were abstracted by 1 of us (R.M.E.). Quality criteria for inclusion were broad, given the heterogeneity of interventions, complexity of outcome measures, and paucity of randomized or longitudinal study designs.

Data Synthesis We generated an inclusive definition of competence: the habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skills, clinical reasoning, emotions, values, and reflection in daily practice for the benefit of the individual and the community being served. Aside from protecting the public and limiting access to advanced training, assessments should foster habits of learning and self-reflection and drive institutional change. Subjective, multiple-choice, and standardized patient assessments, although reliable, underemphasize important domains of professional competence: integration of knowledge and skills, context of care, information management, teamwork, health systems, and patient-physician relationships. Few assessments observe trainees in real-life situations, incorporate the perspectives of peers and patients, or use measures that predict clinical outcomes.

Conclusions In addition to assessments of basic skills, new formats that assess clinical reasoning, expert judgment, management of ambiguity, professionalism, time management, learning strategies, and teamwork promise a multidimensional assessment while maintaining adequate reliability and validity. Institutional support, reflection, and mentoring must accompany the development of assessment programs.

Editorial
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