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# Leadership training for undergraduate medical students

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Physicians play an important leadership role in the management and governance of the healthcare system. Yet, many physicians lack formal management and leadership training to prepare them for this challenging role. This Viewpoint article argues that leadership concepts need to be introduced to undergraduate medical students early and throughout their medical education.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Leadership is an integral part of medical practice. The recent inclusion of “Leader” competency in the CanMEDS 2015 represents a subtle but important shift from the previous “manager” competency. Providing medical students with the basics of leadership concepts early in their medical education allows them to integrate leadership principles into their professional practice.

**Findings** – The Faculty of Medicine at the Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) has developed an eight-module, fully online Physician Leadership Certificate for their undergraduate medical education program. This program is cited as an example of an undergraduate medical curriculum that offers leadership training throughout the 4 years of the MD program.

**Originality/value** – There are a number of continuing professional development opportunities for physicians in the area of management and leadership. This Viewpoint article challenges undergraduate medical education programs to develop and integrate leadership training in their curricula.

**Keywords** Health leadership competencies, Education, Health leadership initiatives

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the United States, said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn”. Over time, the practice of medicine has grown increasingly complex. It continues to evolve as new research informs practice, as public expectations change and as new technologies expand the capacity of medicine to diagnose and treat disease and influence human health. The challenge facing undergraduate medical education programs is to teach – or facilitate, the learning of a body of knowledge that continues to grow and change. There are also increasing demands placed on medical education programs to incorporate more content into medical curricula as the profession evolves to meet public, health system and professional demands.

One area where this pressure to expand curriculum content is being felt, is in the area of leadership. Physicians have historically played, and will continue to play, an important leadership role in the management and governance of the health care system. Yet many physicians lack formal management and leadership training and the requisite skills to prepare them for this challenging role. Moreover, it is important for physicians to be engaged participants in shaping and guiding policies at the level of health organizations and, more broadly, at the governmental level.



The CanMEDS 2015 Physician Competency Framework (Dath *et al.*, 2015; Frank *et al.*, 2015) identifies seven principal roles: Medical Expert, Communicator, Collaborator, Leader, Health Advocate, Scholar, and Professional. The recent inclusion of “leader” marked a shift in emphasis from the previous “manager” role described by the CanMEDS (Dath *et al.*, 2014). The definition of the new CanMEDS Leader competency is as follows:

As Leaders, physicians engage with others to contribute to a vision of a high-quality health care system and take responsibility for the delivery of excellent patient care through their activities as clinicians, administrators, scholars, or teachers[1].

This new emphasis on leadership in medical practice includes an emphasis on contributing to the improvement of health care delivery in interdisciplinary health care teams, health organizations and systems, active engagement in the stewardship of health care resources and demonstration of leadership in clinical practice and manage career planning, finances and health related human resources. See Table I below (Dath *et al.*, 2014, 2015; Frank *et al.*, 2015).

In the past 10 years there has been a proliferation of leadership and management related Continuing Professional Development opportunities aimed at physicians of all levels, from residents to experienced physicians (Maddalena and Fleet, 2015). Concurrently, we are witnessing a growing awareness of the need to include formalized leadership training in undergraduate medical curricula (Clyne *et al.*, 2015; Crites *et al.*, 2008; Pawlina *et al.*, 2006; Webb *et al.*, 2014). For many schools of medicine, leadership training for medical students is a relatively recent addition to medical curricula. Currently, there is a wide range of approaches to teaching leadership skills in medical

Key competencies	Enabling competencies
<i>Physicians are able to</i>	
Contribute to the improvement of health-care delivery in teams, organizations and systems	Apply the science of quality improvement to contribute to improving systems of patient care Contribute to a culture that promotes patient safety Analyze patient-related safety incidents to enhance systems of care Use health informatics to improve the quality of patient care and optimize patient safety
Engage in the stewardship of health-care resources	Allocate health-care resources for optimal patient care Apply evidence and management processes to achieve cost-appropriate care
Demonstrate leadership in professional practice	Demonstrate leadership skills to enhance health care Facilitate change in health care to enhance services and outcomes
Manage career planning, finances and health human resources in a practice	Set priorities and manage time to integrate practice and personal life Manage a career and a practice Implement processes to ensure personal practice improvement

Source: Frank *et al.*, 2015

**Table I.**  
Leadership  
competencies

education programs (Webb *et al.*, 2014). There is a long way to go before we see a standardized leadership curriculum for undergraduate medicine, but the foundation is being laid for such an endeavor.

Learning is formally defined as “the act or experience of one that learns, knowledge or skill acquired by instruction or study, modification of a behavioral tendency by experience (as exposure to conditioning)” (Merriam-Webster, 2016). To introduce medical students to the leadership competency early in their training seems reasonable and, definitely, desirable. Indeed, if you want someone to learn a skill or competency then it should be introduced as early in their educational journey as possible so that it can be fully integrated into their professional practice and mindset.

In 2013, the Faculty of Medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) implemented a new undergraduate medical curriculum. As part of the new curriculum, the Faculty of Medicine has developed a new Physician Leadership Certificate (PLC) in response to the changes in the CanMEDS competency of Leader. Students graduating from the MD program will now also graduate with a Physician Leadership Certificate. The PLC provides medical students with introductory level management and leadership training to enhance their knowledge and skills to prepare them to be leaders in the health care environment.

The PLC is comprised of eight, fully online, asynchronous modules offered over 4 years of the MD program. The new medical curriculum at MUN is divided into four phases. The PLC offers two modules per phase and students complete the modules independently. The PLC modules include the following:

- introduction to leadership concepts;
- structures and organization of the healthcare system;
- strategic planning in health care;
- project management for physicians;
- media relations, communications and social media;
- program evaluation in healthcare settings;
- human resources management; and
- case studies in leadership.

Each module consists of a pre- and post-test to assess knowledge, introductory material, learning objectives for the module, presentation slides, readings, discussion questions, and applied case studies relevant to the topic area. The modules also capitalize on the availability of existing online educational content and social media offerings. Following completion of the module, students are required to complete a self-reflection assignment and an evaluation of the module for quality improvement purposes.

Socrates said, “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel”. I believe introducing leadership concepts early in undergraduate medical training begins the process of “kindling the flame”; that leadership as a competency is an important and integral part of medical practice. Not all physicians will end up as a senior leader in the health system, but most will be leaders in their own practice and in their community. My experience to date in medical education has shown that, as medical students embark on their chosen career, they are somewhat surprised to see a leadership certificate as part of their education. Over the course of their studies, however, I see a growing awareness as

they come to learn that developing their leadership skills is central to their practice as physicians. The earlier leadership concepts can be introduced, the more likely students will develop and integrate this competency into all areas of their practice.

Leadership skills are no different from any other skill we want medical students to learn. This requires a purposeful inclusion of leadership and management content in the curriculum and opportunities to integrate this knowledge into practice throughout their undergraduate training. It is always a challenge to include additional subject areas in an already-crowded curriculum, yet the inclusion of leadership content in medical curricula will help to lay the foundation for physicians to consider leadership as a desirable option for continuing professional development and career choices in leadership positions long after they have entered practice.

### Note

1. [www.royalcollege.ca/portal/page/portal/rc/canmeds/framework/leader](http://www.royalcollege.ca/portal/page/portal/rc/canmeds/framework/leader)

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