To teach patients healthy habits, students first teach themselves

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Effective treatment of prevalent conditions such as obesity and diabetes requires a nation of physicians who are informed on the issues and capable of effectively coaching their patients to adopt better habits. To that end, students at Eastern Virginia Medical School (EVMS) have created nutrition modules that equip medical students to confront these maladies within their communities.

Throughout four years of medical school, the average medical student receives 19.6 hours of nutrition education, and most of that is focused on biochemistry. That—according to research presented by second-year EVMS student Kimberly Ha during the Accelerating Change in Medical Education Student-Led Conference on Leadership—amounts to 1 percent of all lecture hours a student sits through during med school.

“The way my school is approaching nutrition education is very much tailored to how the boards want us to learn nutrition,” Ha said. “I think it’s missing a lot of the practical knowledge about how we want to counsel nutrition to patients. Board testing is one thing. It’s not going to convince your patient to eat more fruits and vegetables. Board testing is more about the biochemistry behind metabolism and that isn’t necessarily what is running through patients’ heads when they are in a grocery store and deciding what they want to eat.”

Training students to train patients

In her presentation, Ha detailed the practical, patient-facing nutrition curriculum that students at Eastern Virginia Medical School are employing within the community. Part of EVMS’ service learning track, the Choosing Healthy Options for Wellness (CHOW) program focuses on nutrition and exercise education with community outreach in low-income patients. CHOW offers free exercise, cooking and nutrition classes at local clinics. The classes are run by medical students.

Before students can run a CHOW class, however, they must first be equipped with relevant nutrition and wellness background information that is not part of their medical school training. To glean the necessary knowledge and skills in proper habits in exercise, cooking and nutrition, students at EVMS have developed a nutrition-focused module for incoming first-year students who will be joining CHOW.

Students are then able to reinforce those lessons while teaching and counseling patients in the classroom setting.

When creating the modules, Ha said the question she asked herself was, “What do student leaders need to know to successfully run a health and wellness course?” The answer included exercise recommendations, cooking demo techniques, and nutrition and healthy eating behavior.
The module, which consists of interactive exercises and concludes with an exam, is tailored toward EVMS students. It is Ha’s hope that the modules can expand to other programs while EVMS students continue to build on CHOW’s success.

“Our patients really enjoy our classes,” Ha said. “You can see them get really involved in discussions. They definitely are doing the jumping jacks and stretching with us and looking forward to trying whatever recipes we are demonstrating. They even tell us how much they appreciate it, and it’s really gratifying to see their enthusiasm and participation, watching them actively write down things from class that they want to remember.”

The UC Davis students’ presentation was among dozens of presentations and speeches that took place during the student-led conference. Co-hosted by the University of Michigan Medical School and the AMA, the theme of the conference was “learn, connect, empower, impact.”

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