An understanding of health systems science, the emerging third pillar in medical education, can pay off for medical students when they take their licensing exams.

Content related to health systems science—an understanding of how care is delivered, how health professionals work together to deliver that care, and how the health system can improve patient care and health care delivery—has become more frequent on the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE). The National Board of Medical Examiners includes the topics in its USMLE Content Outline and offers a dedicated health systems science subject examination.

To help medical students, the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education Consortium has collaborated with the “InsideTheBoards” podcast to create a health systems science (HSS) podcast series. Each episode of the HSS series offers on-the-go learning by breaking down practice exam questions with expert guests.

The first episode of the series features guest Maya Hammoud, MD, MBA, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Michigan Medicine and the AMA’s special adviser on medical education innovation.

“It’s not just about me knowing the science behind a disease or knowing the principles,” Dr. Hammoud said. “It’s about—at the end of the day, how do I deliver care to the patient in front of me but also to the population at large?”

As an educator who works with medical students and residents regularly, Dr. Hammoud offered advice on how to critically think about a clinical scenario and how to identify barriers to treatment that exist in the patient scenario.

Medical students can start learning here about health systems science.
Systems-based care

In addition to offering insight on the importance of HSS on the board exams, the episode also looks at the concept of systems-based care. Each subsequent episode will cover additional health systems science domains.

“We consider systems thinking to be a very important linking domain of all the health systems science domains,” Dr. Hammoud said. “Because it’s the way that it connects everything together. It’s difficult to define. It’s a philosophy or mindset that facilitates your thought process to see how the parts of the system are related and how one affects another.”

A systems thinker will look beyond the basic science of a situation to provide a solution that may be best for a patient, Dr. Hammoud said.

“It’s important to keep patients at the center of what we do and think about all the different components that can influence outcomes,” Dr. Hammoud said. “Not just—did I treat this and give them the correct medication?”

Future episodes of the podcast will feature a learner and a faculty member speaking to the application of health system science.

“I’m hoping the future is bright with tomorrow’s physicians”, Dr. Hammoud said. “And when I need them for my health care, I think they will be thinking of all aspects of care delivery not just what medication they need to prescribe me.”

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