Short Communication

Utilization of work place based assessment tools in medical education: Potential challenges and solutions

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Abstract

From a medical graduate perspective, the field of medicine is quite complex: graduates will encounter a wide range of healthcare scenarios to which they must respond using a professional, competent and skillful approach. Workplace-based assessment (WPBA) tools are a unique form of assessment to evaluate the performance of the medical student in the workplace in real time and has been linked with multiple benefits. However, adoption of WPBA by medical colleges has not been uniform owing to multiple challenges related to feasibility, students and faculty members. In order to facilitate the successful implementation of WPBA tools, medical educators must work as a team in a coordinated manner and ensure that all the stakeholders are part of the process. In conclusion, WPBA have a special role in the making of a competent and professional health care professional. However, the process of employing WPBA tools is a challenging task and its use requires us to be thoughtful and planned in our approach to accomplish the intended learning outcomes.

Introduction

From a medical graduate perspective, the field of medicine is quite complex: graduates will encounter a wide range of healthcare scenarios to which they must respond using a professional, competent and skillful approach.[1] The role of assessment during the training period is crucial and it helps them recognize their strengths as well as areas where they need improvement, and helps them become competent in dealing with a variety of conditions. At the same time, it is very important to ensure the safety of patients. Assessment offers a unique opportunity for medical graduates to improve themselves based on feedback from assessors.

Merits of Workplace-based assessment tools

Workplace-based assessment (WPBA) tools are a unique form of assessment to evaluate the performance of the medical student in the workplace in real time and has been linked with multiple benefits.[1,2] This approach has benefits compared to traditional assessments, which usually happen in proxy settings where students are assessed based on what has been written or how they fare in a question-and-answer session, without little or no assessment of their behavior or competence in a workplace setting.[1] WPBA has been linked with multiple benefits: for example, specific feedback improves clinical performance; increase in time spent with faculty helps student understand where they stand and how to improve to accomplish intended learning outcomes; its formative nature; and, finally, it adds structure to the process of assessment.[2,3]

Challenges in using WPBA Tools

The question arises: if WPBA tools are so useful and can assess so many domains of learning, why have they not been more widely adopted by medical institutions universally? The answer probably lies in the fact that the process of planning and using WPBA tools for assessment is challenging.

Faculty challenges

From the faculty perspective, tools like these are best used

by faculty when they are trained (what to assess, expected standards, giving feedback) committed and motivated to the entire process of assessment as it is a time-consuming process, and willing to do additional work (designing rubrics of milestones for assessment, giving feedback to each student about their performance, developing a shared action plan for improvement) in addition to the routine assignments of being a teacher.[2-4] Moreover, in order to successfully execute and sustain WBPA tools, there is a requirement for a certain number of faculty, which in itself is a challenge.[1]

Student challenges
From the student perspective, students may be reluctant to be assessed via a different approach and thus the students should be informed well in advance.[5] However, a larger challenge has been a reluctance to receive constructive criticism and feedback from different assessors and there is a possibility that students might not take such feedback in the right way or seek feedback in the future.[3-5] It should be noted if a student receives encouraging feedback on their initial performance, they might become overconfident which also affects their learning curve. Further, the possibility of students being anxious about their performance due to peer pressure cannot be not ruled out.[3,5]

Other challenges
It is extremely important that for a successful assessment using WPBA tools, it is important to establish mutual trust between student and assessor, and this in turn depends on the type and quality of feedback and the ability of the assessor to keep the assessment findings confidential.[1,2] In addition, the feasibility of using such tools in the institution, support from the administrators & other stakeholders, scheduling of a series of assessments (as a single assessment cannot judge the progression in learning) within the available time, infrastructure, and logistics support all determine the uptake of using WPBA. Validity & reliability, selection, and bias in selection of assessors or in the assessment context need to be carefully planned.[5]

Overcoming challenges
In order to ensure successful implementation of WPBA tools, teams must work in a coordinated manner and ensure that faculty members, students and administrators are aware of the associated merits.[1,6] However, to manage the time factor and scheduling of assessments, assessments must be planned at the start of the academic year, informing all stakeholders and strictly adhering to the plan.[6] Student participation can be enhanced by offering constructive feedback and having them document their learning in the form of reflections.[3,4] In order to reduce the bias component, the aim should be to include a number of assessors and a number of assessments across a range of

settings, with more weight given to qualitative feedback than to numbers. The entire process should be evaluated periodically for improvement, including students' perspectives.[2-4]

Conclusion
In conclusion, WPBA can play a unique role in the creation of a competent and professional health care professional. However, the process of employing WPBA is a challenging task and should be approached with careful thought and planning to accomplish the intended learning outcomes.

Ethical approval
Not applicable.

Competing interests
None.

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