

Abstract

How has internationalization translated to the sphere of medical education? This article considers that question in the US context, pointing to the distinct, yet overlapping, concepts of global health and internationalization of medical curricula, and advocating for an interdisciplinary approach. Failure to incorporate internationalization into medical education will limit medical students' understanding of the global, social, cultural, and ethical issues associated with medical practice and research, with implications for the current pandemic and beyond.

Needed More Than Ever: Internationalization of Medical Education

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The COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating the need for efficient international collaboration in biomedical research, education, and patient care. Such global health emergencies require efficiency in international communication, expert and culturally competent healthcare leadership and practice (locally, nationally, and internationally), rapid international public health action, and collaborative international biotechnology and medical science research. Today more than ever before, these are not optional choices, but represent essential components that should be included in medical education curricula globally.

Defining Internationalization of Medical Education

Currently, internationalization of medical education is a broad term understood in different ways. Our research shows that in the United States, for example, it is frequently delivered primarily through global health programs that largely represent global North-South initiatives, or by addressing issues around social determinants of health locally. However, internationalization of medical education should include consideration of *all* aspects of internationalization; of how intercultural and international issues might impact professional practice and medical education—locally as well as globally. Internationalization of medical education needs to include exposure to both higher-income and lower-middle income countries.

Given the current healthcare environment, internationalization of medical education can help in building awareness of international health challenges, create a foundation for international collaboration and exchange, and introduce a global perspective of medical practice to students, so that the next generation of medical professionals can work efficiently and collaboratively on world health issues.

Internationalization of Medical Education and Global Health—Two Distinct Areas

In today's world, it is no longer appropriate to use the terms "internationalization of medical education," "global health," or "global health education" interchangeably. While there is overlap between internationalization of medical education and global health, these two areas are distinct. Internationalization of medical education is understood as an educational concept, a framework, and a means to achieve an international educational goal in medical education—not a goal in and of itself. Medical competencies achieved through internationalization of medical education can ultimately improve global health. Although often understood as an area of social justice in healthcare, the classical definition of global health includes improving aspects of health for *all* people worldwide. While the ultimate educational goals of global health and internationalization of medical education overlap (i.e., cultural competency), internationalization of medical education focuses on the comparative aspects and analysis of differences between nations with regard to healthcare (e.g., international health systems, economics, law, ethics, outcomes measures) and on international understanding. In this context, internationalization of medical education highlights learning meaningful differences between individual nations, whereas global health issues transcend individual nations.

Goals and Outcomes

Internationalization of medical education is paramount to ensuring that future physicians practice medicine within a global frame of reference. Furthermore, it can provide the foundation and framework for international leadership and collaboration, and provide physicians with skills in cultural competencies, ultimately improving healthcare worldwide and thereby enhancing global health.

Goals and outcomes associated with internationalization of medical education include, but are not limited to, improvement of sensitivity to social, intercultural, and ethical differences; knowledge and appreciation of differences between healthcare delivery systems; understanding of global public health challenges; in-depth understanding of global biomedical research; and international networking, leadership, and collaboration competencies. As a result, physicians and medical leaders are able to practice medicine as globally minded and socially accountable medical practitioners.

International educators need to see the importance of focusing on developing all medical students' understanding of the social, cultural, and ethical issues associated with medical research and practice. However, despite the potential positive impact on global healthcare, how to achieve the above goals and outcomes has not been a shared priority of study worldwide.

The Call for Internationalization of Medical Education

To date, international education in medical schools is fragmented, competencies are not agreed upon, and internationalization programs vary, without official guidelines or agreed upon formats. Published work is mainly found within periodicals of other health professions (i.e., nursing and public health), with few in medical journals. In order to bring awareness of global aspects to medicine, internationalization of medical education needs to find its place in standard medical school curricula and has to be established as an investigational area of educational research.

Internationalization elements should be an essential part of medical education, and not an optional extracurricular part of medical school. Nor should internationalization elements be considered in competition with other subject matters. For many institutions, extracurricular student outbound mobility currently serves as a synonym for internationalization of medical education. However, these programs are accessible only to a small percentage of students. We argue that this approach is insufficient and call for an internationally informed approach that focuses on all students and medical educators.

Internationalization of medical education can be achieved on many levels in academia—including governmental and institutional levels, within a university, and among faculty and students—at home and abroad. There is no “one size fits all” approach. Healthcare professionals, medical educators, global health educators, and scientists in the social sciences need to come together to work out best formats and practices regarding what fits best for each school and country—with an interdisciplinary and international approach. Given the current environment, we argue that this is a high priority area of educational research and professional practice.

Medical school curricula designed and delivered in ways that are informed by research into curriculum design, teaching, learning, and internationalization are urgently required. This will, in turn, require internationally minded and interculturally competent medical educators. As we have learned in 2020, the future of successful global healthcare lies in the collaborative and international competencies of the next generation of medical leaders. Failure to incorporate internationalization of medical education into medical education will limit the full potential of developing all medical students' understanding of the global social, cultural, and ethical issues associated with medical practice and research—impeding what medical higher education can contribute to: shaping a global medical world and improving global health. ▲

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