Communication Skills Teaching at UMass Medical School: A Tradition of Excellence and Innovation

Since its first entering class was admitted in 1970, UMass Medical School has been recognized as a national leader in communication skills teaching and continues to be at the forefront of innovation in health communications education. The UMMS tradition of excellence and valuing of communication skills is deeply rooted and firmly established in the school’s founding mission to advance excellence in primary care education and optimally prepare UMMS students to excel as tomorrow’s physicians – caring, competent and fulfilled in their chosen career.

Responding to this charge, UMass was ahead of its time in establishing a required course in communication skills as part of its inaugural core curriculum, well before communication skills were officially pronounced as core competencies by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education and the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education, following the turn of the new millennium in 2000. From 1991-2007, communication skills teaching at UMMS flourished under the leadership of Dean Aaron Lazare, nationally recognized communications skills expert and co-author of the landmark textbook The Medical Interview: Clinical Care, Education and Research, published in 1995. Fueled by national trends that included the required communication competency in GME and CME, the scope of communication skills teaching at UMMS has continued to diversify and expand beyond the foundational elements of the medical interview to include the broader dimensions of learning integral to health care communication, such as the doctor-patient relationship, professionalism, ethical reasoning, compassionate and caring attitudes, self-awareness and personal reflection.

Building on this strong foundation, UMass continues a trajectory of innovation and change in communication education by embracing new, state-of-the-art educational technologies and novel approaches to learning, which have promoted the quality and effectiveness of our communications skills curriculum and ensured that UMass Medical School graduates are best equipped with the communication skills competencies for their lifelong careers as physicians.

Perhaps the most widely recognized innovation in communication education at UMMS is use of standardized patients (SPs) for both teaching and assessing students’ communication skills. A leading “early adopter” of SPs in medical education, UMass has developed a nationally recognized program for SP training. For more than three decades, the UMMS SP program has been formally training individuals to authentically and reliably portray “real” patients and accurately rate student communication skills in mock encounters that replicate real-world patient care. UMass makes extensive use of SPs across all years of the curriculum, in which OSCEs (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations) are in place for training our medical students and nursing students. OSCEs create a series of SP-based case scenarios designed to address specific communication goals, ranging from the basic medical interview encounter, such as a patient presenting with chest pain, to more complex issues, such as breaking bad news, taking a sexual history and discussing end-of-life care and advance directives. While OSCEs are widely used to teach and assess communication skills in all core clerkships at UMMS, the curriculum has also pioneered the use of SPs in innovative educational programs that address important and emerging issues in health communication, including cross-cultural communication, domestic violence screening, professionalism, care of the geriatric patient, smoking cessation, substance abuse screening and counseling, motivational interviewing, interprofessional team-based care, and disclosure and apology for medical errors. Many of these UMMS educational programs have garnered competitive grants awards and regional and national recognition through publication in the high-impact journals in medical education and peer-reviewed presentations at national and international meetings of leading organizations in the field of education and communication.

Newest on the list of communications skills innovations at UMMS is the launching of the “multiple mini-interview” (MMI) program as part of the admissions process for the school of medicine. Now in its third year of implementation, the MMI has replaced the standard one-on-one medical school interview with a series of brief (e.g., eight-minute) encounters, in which the applicant interacts with an MMI “rater,” who assesses the candidate’s communication and interpersonal skills, as well as other foundational skills central to the practice of medicine, including critical thinking, ethical decision-making, self-awareness and professionalism. In each MMI encounter, the applicant discusses with the interviewer a scenario of general relevance to health care (e.g., drug advertising), with all interviewers rating the applicant using a common, standardized scale. The MMI has been extensively researched and, in a study at one medical school, was demonstrated to be the best admissions predictor of OSCE performance, as well as student’s overall clerkship performance ratings (H. Reiter, MedEd 2007). The MMI has been positively reviewed by UMMS medical school applicants and is being used nationwide by roughly 20 percent of the 145 accredited U.S. allopathic medical schools. As national trends show more schools adopting the MMI model, UMMS has the distinction of being among the first cohort of medical schools nationwide to implement the MMI as a tool for identifying students with the communications skills and related abilities that will best prepare them as skilled and effective communicators in medicine and beyond.

Building on the MMI, the foundational skills of the medical interview, the use of SPs and OSCEs across all four years of the curriculum and state-of-the-art innovation in communication education, UMMS has stayed true to its founding mission for excellence in teaching and the ongoing advancement of communication as a cornerstone of the UMMS educational experience. Ask any of our UMMS graduates about the skills that they acquired in medical school that are most valuable to their practices today, and you will not be surprised to hear that it’s the communication skills that most endure and make the biggest difference for our students as physicians and, most importantly, for the patients they serve.

Michele Pugnaire, MD, is a professor of Family Medicine and Community Health and senior associate dean, Office of Educational Affairs, at UMass Medical School.