



PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

Commentary: Case Design to Emphasize Population Health Concepts in Problem-based Learning

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The paper on case design by Pham & Blumberg (2000) is innovative and informative. The article clearly identifies the authors' commitment to promoting awareness toward an important shift in medical education as well as in the educational directions of related helping professions. From a primarily pathology-oriented model to the Health Belief Model, they are making a valuable contribution to the challenge faced by providers who acknowledge the need to offer more than the cure of disease. They also nicely clarify how the questions we ask and the cases we design can be strong sources of influence on the direction of students' learning.

Grounded in the recognition that the elimination of disease still leaves much to be desired in achieving health, Drs. Pham and Blumberg use a creative integration of adult learning models and methods, the tool of the narrative case to enhance the learning process, and a multilevel system and interdisciplinary approach to emphasize population perspectives of health. Especially important is the solidly realistic and somewhat humbling reminder that problems often do not result in one "best" solution but rather require a multitude of incremental interventions.

Several questions can be raised for consideration, further inquiry and possible additional research in these areas. These questions build upon the stimulating ideas raised by the authors and arise in four areas: the health belief model; education; a health and education combination; and research method.

Health Belief Model

What are the authors identifying as the "more" in their observation that "more than the cure of disease" is needed to achieve health? Are they including growth

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models, the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 1997), empowerment models, quality of life measures, factors of emotional well being, and the use of environmental resources? What are the specific reasons the population perspective was chosen rather than some of the other health models?

Education

What factors must be present to qualify as an “adequate” discussion of population and psychosocial content? How will that adequacy be recognized—i.e. how will we know it when we see it?

Health and Education Combined

Case examples are illustrative of the multilevel systems approach, the holistic approaches in health and the helping processes, and the nature of complexity. In what ways have the authors incorporated recent research in each of these areas into the background of their educational and health practice perspectives?

Research Method

The benefits noted in the use of the case narrative introduce the idea that qualitative methods of research (Frankel & Devers, 2000)—in addition to the more widely used quantitative methods—may be helpful for student learning. These methods can assist students in creating their own case designs for ongoing learning as well. Have the authors considered qualitative methods of research to enhance the emphasis on population health concepts or were these methods deemed unfit for their purposes?

Finally, the question can be posed about the either/or nature of the “individual vs. population focus.” Does this issue necessarily need to be viewed from a “versus” or “either/or” stance? What purpose does such a stance serve? Is it likely that both the individual and the population foci interact in a way that might address the complexity of the case issues in a more thorough sense? In the end, it seems the question of purpose arises as we observe realities of health practice: a population focus may or may not serve individual health needs and an individual focus may or may not serve a population’s health needs. Do they interrelate in some fashion, each informing the other?

Drs. Pham and Blumberg present the case design as a highly useful tool in health education. Creative use of case illustrations reflects current directions in adult learning and experiential learning practices. Educators, students, and the patients served will all benefit from these approaches.

References

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