

The Assessment of Competence of Students in the Health Field

DR. ABRAHAM GALEA M.D.
FRCP(G), FRCP(ED), FRCPsych, D.P.M.
PHYSICIAN SUPERINTENDENT MT. CARMEL HOSPITAL
SENIOR LECTURER IN PSYCHIATRY
UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

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In September 1980, the World Health Organisation set up a *Working Group* entrusted with the task of re-examining assessment systems currently employed by Member States of the WHO in the evaluation of competence of students in the health field, the finding of faults within these systems, the identification of general principles involved in the planning of an adequate assessment programme, and the suggestion of practical ways whereby these principles could be implemented.

The members of the Working Group met over a 4-day period (23-26th Sept. 1980) during which assessment practices throughout Europe were reviewed, and associated difficulties and problems were discussed.

The purpose of the Working Group was to indicate what action might be taken by Member States to improve existing assessment arrangements. During the course of the meeting, the following principles were identified:

An assessment programme is essential in Medical Training:

- a) for the student, because it provides information as to "where he stands" in comparison to his peers and to a standard norm, i.e. it demonstrates whether he has learned the facts and skills that are expected of him. In this way, the programme has a great bearing on how and what a student learns.
- b) for the teacher, since it indicates how effectively learning and teaching are progressing.

Being so important, it is essential that the assessment programme be appropriate, relevant, effective and efficient and that the information obtained from it be valid and reliable.

A wide variety of programmes exist; there is no fixed 'ideal' one that can be employed by all Member States. Any assessment system must be planned as an integral component part of an institution's total educational programme; it must take into consideration the needs, plans and policies of the individual country.

Assessments tend to concentrate too much on the recall of factual knowledge, which is just ONE of the several pre-requisites of the would-be-doctor or health worker. Other vital attributes, like, for instance, the ability to

generate and test, hypotheses, to solve problems, to communicate and work with others, to make relevant observation, to examine patients, to write clear concise readable case-notes, to execute diagnostic and therapeutic procedures etc., are *NOT TESTED* and are of equal importance.

Thus many currently used assessment programmes are *inappropriate and unreliable*. Assessment should not emphasise the recall of factual information but should concentrate on the application of such knowledge, the performance of tasks and the solution of problems. More emphasis needs to be placed on what the student *can actually do*.

The student should be assessed on 'the whole' rather than on the 'details of a part'; he must not fail to see the wood for the trees.

Assessment questions should be closely related to real-life situations, and should examine performance of students on medical emergencies and life-threatening situations rather than proficiency in academic detail. Assessment should concentrate upon performance in real-life settings.

The aim of the assessment should be to guide the student through his studies, rather than to "pass or fail" him. Consequently, continuous informal assessment by tutors and self-assessment by the student himself should be encouraged.

The assessment programme should not interfere unduly with student learning and should be based upon the observations of a number of examiners made over a period of time.

Change from traditional examining methods is necessarily difficult because old methods tend to become traditional and time-honoured. Each Member State should however re-examine its own systems and establish new and alternative methods and techniques.

Both teaching and administrative staff should have a sound practical knowledge of available assessment techniques and of the educational principles behind them.

Also, the student should always be informed of the function and detailed nature of the assessment system, and of what is reasonably expected of him.