

‘Walk with Us...’ Student Peer-Mentoring in Interdisciplinary Cancer Education

Zainab Al-Maqrashi¹ · Yasser Al-Lawati¹ · Amira Al-Sadi¹ · Malak Al-Wahaiby¹ · Ritu Lakhtakia^{2,3}

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Abstract ‘Walk with us...’ reflects on a series of innovative educational journeys that have offered value addition in cancer education of health professions students. It provides an insight into interdisciplinary peer education through extra-curricular pathways. It taps on student creativity and inspirational techniques in health education that stimulate student-centered learning.

Keywords Student-centered education · Interdisciplinary education · Peer mentoring

‘Walk with me...’, a contemplative piece on a real-life educational journey undertaken by medical students, earned a place under ‘Reflections’ in this journal in 2014 [1]. It recounted an innovative learning experience by two clerking students: an audio-visual first-hand account of the initial hospital visit of a breast cancer patient, leading up from diagnosis, breaking bad news to multi-disciplinary management. They narrated their experience at a clinico-pathological conference titled ‘SCRAPS’ (surgery, clinical disciplines, radiology, anatomy, psychiatry and laboratory sciences) in the College of Medicine at Sultan Qaboos University, Oman. Since then medical students have eagerly ‘volunteered’ to be part of creative educational forays on this platform with the pathology-educator hosts.

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✉ Ritu Lakhtakia
ritu.lakhtakia@mbru.ac.ae

¹ College of Medicine and Health Sciences, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman

² MBRU College of Medicine, Dubai Health Care City, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

³ Department of Pathology, COM and HS, SQU, Muscat, Oman

It was followed in 2015, by a simulated classroom portrayal by medical and biomedical sciences student in conversation with a mentoring physician-radiologist-pathologist team. This time, they delivered the cancer educational theme of integration of knowledge across health professions. Titled ‘Unveiling Cancer’ [2], the presentation was chosen with an intention to reinforce the knowledge of application of a laboratory tool (immunohistochemistry) in tumor diagnosis. On the one hand, it provided an opportunity to a student in clerkship years to learn from his biomedical sciences peer. On the other, it was a lesson in the caution to be exercised when technology fails and insightful interpretation prevents fatal mistakes in diagnosis. Through the differential diagnosis of a ‘small round blue cell tumor’ the students demonstrated to the audience, the cross-reactivity of antibodies in tumor diagnosis and their judicious use. The resultant change of an initial diagnosis of peripheral neuroectodermal tumor to lymphoma modified therapy and outcome.

Student-centered education through SCRAPS came full circle in Circa 2016 with ‘Walk with us...’. As the pathology host of the event with like-minded educators, I sowed the seed of an idea by providing the central theme of gastrointestinal stromal tumors (GIST). This time, a clerkship student took on the reins to integrate students across different phases of the curriculum and across the medical and biomedical sciences programs of the College of Medicine and Health Sciences. The mentoring clerk then organized the learning and teaching process of the first *students-only* SCRAPS. She assumed the role of peer-mentor, coach, and narrator introducing the subject and stringing the participants’ contributions with incisive comments and audience questions. A Phase 1 student in the first year of medical school laid the foundation by describing the structure and function of the cells of Cajal, which are the presumptive cell of origin of GIST. A biomedical sciences student recounted the genetic basis of the familial variant of

the tumor and the signaling receptors on tumor cells that enable targeted therapy. Taking the cue, a Phase 2 student from year three of the medical curriculum pictorially illustrated the macroscopic and microscopic appearances of the tumor, supplemented by the immuno-histochemical demonstration of receptors. The latter technique was shown to have a trifold diagnostic, predictive and prognostic role. The student-clerk-mentor then wrapped up the journey by summarizing the presentation and outcomes of a series of patients diagnosed with this tumor at the university teaching hospital. She invoked the ‘Walk with us...’ theme by underscoring the importance of vertical integration of knowledge with each stage of education offering value to the other. She also reinforced the relevance of knowledge sharing and collaboration among health professions students, at a time when cutting edge laboratory technology provides vital inputs into patient management.

In ‘Walk with me...’ as mentors we stimulated the student’s interest in novel self-learning opportunities. In ‘Walk with us...’ they set an example of peer-mentoring and interdisciplinary learning in cancer education. We continue our

educator’s mission with the next generation of students, in the quiet satisfaction of having passed the baton to the cancer professionals and educators of the future.

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