

Promoting Mentorship and Scholarship Among Underrepresented Minority Medical Students

Dear Editor:

Mentorship and scholarship are crucial for success in academic medicine. Previous literature has shown that underrepresented minorities in various disciplines of medicine often have difficulty finding adequate mentorship support to aid in their scholarly productivity and professional development. This challenge has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic as students cannot connect with mentors in traditional ways. Acknowledging the value of mentorship and the challenge that underrepresented minority (URM) medical students face, we sought to create a platform to provide them with early research and medical writing opportunities to get easy access to dedicated mentors devoted to their academic success and to receive support for their overall success in medical school and beyond.

This innovative virtual program included URM medical students, faculty, and other medical students at the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW). A pilot program led by the primary and senior authors was completed successfully in the 2020-2021 academic year. Two faculty (primary and senior authors) and 2 peer mentors were connected virtually with 4 URM medical students who completed a survey prior to the session indicating their past research experience and their expectations for the program. Faculty were recruited based on their interest in mentoring URM medical students. A virtual workshop was held to introduce the cohort of students to the platform and explore the various means of scholarship, including writing case reports and letters to the editor. The URM medical students completed 3 case reports that were presented at a national conference and 1 letter to the editor during the 2-month pilot program.

Based on program feedback, we expanded it to the 2021-2022 academic year. After holding an initial workshop, we created a mentor-mentee model where medical students in the first and second year were paired with a peer medical student mentor from the third or fourth year. Participants included 16 URM medical students with 6 student peer mentors and 9 faculty mentors. URM medical students were involved in at least 1 scholarly project, and this program was successful in having more than 15 accepted case reports to 3 national meetings (American College of Physicians, Society of Hospital Medicine, Society of General Internal Medicine). Using the resources provided by the cohort, URM medical students were able to secure

research opportunities. Scholarly productivity was 5 times greater than the previous year.

The URM medical student mentorship program has highlighted the crucial role of structured mentorship platforms in promoting scholarly productivity among this population. The next steps for our project will be to pursue additional institutional funding and expanding our mentor base with faculty from varied disciplines. The program's success will be assessed by the number of scholarly projects presented at meetings and published in peer-reviewed journals, along with survey results from participants about the program's effectiveness.

—*Sonal Chandratre, MD; Gifty Marfowaa, BS; Abdul-Rahman Abdel-Reheem, BS; Pinky Jha, MD*

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Health Illiteracy: The Crisis in Rural America

Dear Editor:

Health literacy is defined as “the degree to which individuals have the ability to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.”¹ Despite the gravity of these essential skills, the health literacy competency rate in the United States is only 12%.² It is no secret that rural America disproportionately suffers from low health literacy, as evidenced by its high rates of poor health and chronic disease. There are many factors attributed to these disparities; however, health literacy is our primary focus in that it is a fundamental and rooted explanation for health trends across rural America.

Literacy is commonly conceptualized as reading and writing; however, literacy embodies numerous aspects of life. As aspiring physicians and recent graduates of the Community Health Internship Program through the Area Health Education Center in Wisconsin, we developed and transformed our understanding of rural medicine. We witnessed the struggles many people endure to obtain adequate health care in a rural setting, including transportation issues, lack of access and understanding of health insurance, and the absence of urgency for regular doctor visits. Our

initial first-hand experiences with Afghan refugees revealed the desperate need for health literacy. Each week of our program, we tutored refugees navigating their new environment and quickly discovered they were entirely uneducated regarding matters of our health care system.

We further learned from several local nonprofit organizations and involved community leaders of the hardships associated with rural health. We found that there is a health professional workforce shortage, limitations of rural health training opportunities, population health challenges, delay of care, and low health literacy prevalent in rural health care. We discovered that most patients gravitate toward emergency department or short-stay models of care. Additionally, the patients tend to be older, sicker, and less well-insured.

The solutions for addressing these concerns rely both on the individual health consumer and major community structures, such as health care systems, educational institutions, and the media. A starting point to improve this problem is to make health information easier to understand (print, oral, or electronic), improve education on these literacy skills, and reform health care delivery to a more patient-centered focus.

To help expand health care knowledge in rural communities, we created a handbook that includes step-by-step instructions on how to schedule a medical appointment, how to establish a provider, easy health insurance information, and many other resources in and around the community of Wausau, Wisconsin. This handbook can be accessed at the Marathon County Literacy Council or online at <https://mclitofwausau.org/>. It is our hope that with similar resources many rural residents will better understand health care.

Conquering these challenges will require determination and a willingness to create solutions. Rural health illiteracy is a public health crisis, and it is time to address it.

—*Mario Duwe; Megan Lechleitner*

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