

Mentorship at Qazvin Medical School: A pilot study in Iran

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ABSTRACT

Background: Mentorship is not practiced in any Iranian university, while it has been expanded in medical schools in some developed countries.

Purpose: To evaluate the results of mentorship program on the educational achievements of first-year medical students in Qazvin University of Medical Sciences during 2000-2001 academic year.

Methods: The mentors were selected from the third-year volunteer students. Forty five students and nine mentors (each five novices for one mentor) entered the study. At the end of the year the viewpoints of the mentees were surveyed through a self-administered questionnaire and the mentors participated in focus group discussions.

Results: The interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data indicated that both mentors and mentees were satisfied with the mentorship program and stressed on its continuation for the coming years. They had found mentorship a give-and-take process and constructive in their careers. Their teachers had also considered mentorship, to some extend, useful.

Conclusion: More studies need to be conducted to define the role of mentors more clearly and to evaluate the effects of mentorship on Iranian medical students' educational development.

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Introduction

In Greek mythology, "mentor" was the name of a character who advised and counselled (1). The word "mentor" refers to an older, more experienced adult who helps a younger adult navigate the world. The mentor serves as a role model and supports, guides, and counsels the young adult (2).

Mentoring has become an important element in the career development of man in business, academia and selected professions. It has also become a significant power strategy for women in general and for nurses in particular during the last 20 years (3).

Students straight from high school and with fewer life experiences, may need more direction (4). In the recent years mentoring has been expanded in some European medical schools such as Linkoping, Sweden. Mentor is a higher-grade student who develops a relationship with the novice (freshman) for the purpose of providing advice, support, information and feedback in order to enhance the educational development of the

novice. Effective mentoring can be characterized by certain attributes (5):

1. Mentoring is a teaching – learning process for both the mentor and the mentee;
2. It is a reciprocal relationship for the mentor and the mentee, a give-and-take situation for both parties;
3. There is a knowledge or competence differential between participants;
4. The focus of the relationship is career development;
5. The relationship will endure over several years; and
6. Mentee will in turn become mentor to others.

Mentoring is an empowering experience for both mentors and novices. The process of seeking out mentors is an exercise in growth for novices (3).

Mentorship has also been suggested as a way to combat the stress and psychological problem of the students during their initial entry to the university (6).

In 1999, Kossoff et al showed that students who had participated in a mentorship program that provided early clinical experience, demonstrated

significantly improved clinical skills in the pediatrics clerkship (7).

The School of Medicine is one of the four Schools of Qazvin University of Medical Sciences. The school has about 600 students and each academic year, 45 to 75 newcomers are enrolled.

It has been observed and acknowledged by the Dean and supervisors that many new students need to be supported and led in their educational lives by experienced persons intimately.

Since there is no mentorship program in academic education in Iran, the objective of this pilot study, as a new experience, was to evaluate the results of mentorship on educational development of the first year medical students at Qazvin School of Medicine, so that the program could be realized in the coming years.

Materials & Methods

In 2000, a core group of the Educational Development Center in Qazvin University of Medical Sciences discussed the mentorship program and decided it to be experienced as a pilot study on the medical students, as a way to improve and realize the students' potentials to enhance their careers. The group designed a one-year mentorship program for the new coming medical students.

All first year medical students entered a mentorship program in 2000-2001 academic year. Mentors were selected from the third year volunteer students who were known to be competent in their educational progress, ethical aspects and good personalities. They were briefed about their tasks by the academic adviser. Forty five novices and nine mentors entered the study (Fig 1).

Every five students were assigned to a mentor so that they could be helped in their educational, cultural and academic lives. The mentors were also supervised by an academician adviser. The mentors reported their activities and interactions with the mentees to the advisor; they also sought necessary consultations and advice.

At the end of the academic year the viewpoints of mentees were surveyed using a self-administered structured questionnaire and the mentors participated in focus group discussions to debate and evaluate the mentorship program. We also asked some teachers' views who were teaching the first-year students.

The data were interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively.

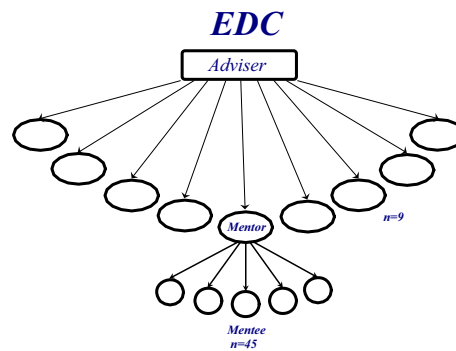


Fig 1. The Mentoring teams at Qazvin medical School

Results

The total of 45 first- year medical students with average age of 18.9 ± 1.2 years participated in the mentorship program. Of the total number, 37 (83.3%) were Iranian and the rest were foreigners. The foreigner students were from the region countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc.

Of the total number of 45, 16 (35.5%) were male and 29 (54.4%) were female. About 85% of the students (consisting of 13 boys and 25 girls) had found the mentorship program interesting and novel.

Only 7.1% thought of mentorship as a time consuming program. Meanwhile all students believed that the program would be necessary and useful for the progress of the students -60% (10 boys and 17 girls) took it as necessary and 40% (6 boys and 12 girls) as useful. Of all mentees, 19 (42%) thought of their mentors not to be much interested in the program, whereas 58% had found their mentors very enthusiastic of their roles. Of all students, 77.7% (12 boys and 23 girls) suggested that mentorship program should be officially started in the coming years.

All students believed that mentorship was a new experience and also a good help in their university lives. According to the students' views the frequency distribution of the attributed utilities of the mentor-mentee relations was as follows:

- Following the curriculum (75.4%);
- Academic behaviors (64.2%);
- Socio-cultural relations (54.7%);
- Educational planning for their futures (45.2%);
- and

- Personalities (21.5%) - taken as shaping their personalities following their mentors behaviors (Fig 2).

We also sought the views of 8 full-time faculty members who were more in contact with the freshmen, through face to face interviews.

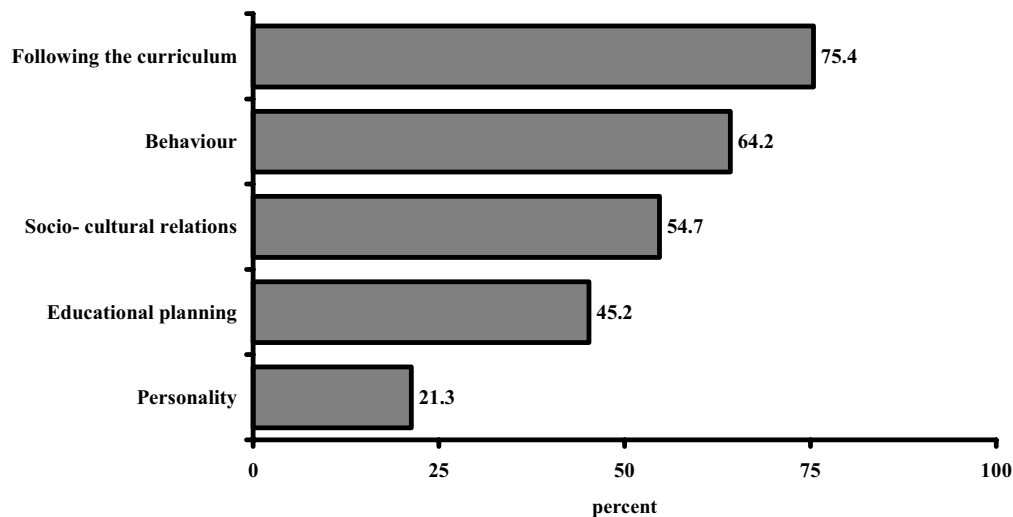


Fig 2. Frequency distribution of the attributed utilities of mentor-mentee relations

There was no significant difference between the views of the girls and that of the boys.

The mentors (five girls and four boys) participated in group discussion sessions to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the program. The majority wanted mentorship program to be continued in the coming years. Eight students thought that mentorship program was useful and mentor-mentee relationship empowered them in leadership, developed their personalities and was a successful experience in their careers. They believed that as mentors, they had felt to be useful in intimating socio-cultural, educational, and behavioral aspects of the academic life of the new students, Iranian ones as well as the foreigners. They also thought they had been helpful in educational progress of their mentees. Some of the mentors said “we wish we had mentors when we had entered the university for the first time”.

They also found mentorship a give-and-take process which develops their interpersonal and human skills that are especially useful for their future lives. Most suggested the program to be continued in the coming years and be extended to the clinical courses. Two of them said that being mentor had been time consuming and some suggested that good mentors should be rewarded each year by the Dean or other university authorities. In the discussions, no obvious difference was observed according to gender.

Most of them believed that these new students, especially the foreigners seemed to have fewer difficulties in running the courses, finding references and learning behaviors comparing with the previous ones. However, according to their opinions the mentorship program could be evaluated more objectively provided it is devised and experienced more completely in the coming years.

Discussion

The result of this pilot study points out the usefulness of the mentorship program. Although it was for the first time that such a program was practiced in our university as well as in our country, and we had some limitations to lay it out within the system, the students' mutual perception of mentor-novice interaction was positive.

The new students had not found themselves in a strange environment at the beginning of their academic life; conversely, through their mentors' leadership, they soon coped with their new situation. This was especially true for foreign students. On the other hand, the mentors had practiced “leadership” and “friendship” with the younger students -as some of the mentors wished they have had mentors when they had entered the university. In fact the mentor-mentee interpersonal relationship makes the mentee respect the career achievements of the mentor, and the mentee will follow the mentor model. This

role modelling is both conscious and unconscious. The mentee with his/her own character and self-respect will evaluate the behaviors of the mentor and select those behaviors worthy of being imitated (8).

Ko et al suggest that mentorship program, among other factors, can be an important strategy to enable undergraduates to cope better with the demands of tertiary education (6).

Van Luijk et al stress on the importance of having a system that can monitor the professional behavior of students from the start of their carrier, in combination with adequate academic advice. They address criteria for assessment of professional behaviors of the students at Maastricht Medical School (4).

In 1995, the Faculty of Medicine of Saarland University in Germany started a pilot project to reduce anonymity within the faculty by introducing a mentorship program (Student-utorium). A group of up to 12 students from different levels was assigned to a faculty member. The faculty member responded the questions and problems concerning such areas as the curriculum, career planning or doctoral thesis as well as personal problems. After two years, the participants were interviewed about the program and the acceptance turned out to be high (10).

At the present time, mentorship programs are running in postgraduate training courses in medicine. It is also experienced in research activities. Fuller indicated that mentorship plays a critical role in setting standards and models for those who want to be involved in research (11). Mentorship has been more experienced in nursing practice and education than in medicine (3). However, the related literature reveals that confusion still exists regarding both the concept of mentorship and the role of the mentor (12). Since some of the mentees thought of their mentors not to be much interested, it can be argued that the role of the mentor in medical schools should be defined with trial-and-error activities. We must clearly determine to what extend should the mentor-mentee relations go on and be accepted by the cultural contexts and ethical considerations. Although in this pilot study both mentors and mentees had a willing for continuation of the program, as the teachers suggested more studies

should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of mentor-novice relationship more objectively according to our socio-cultural environment.

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