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An overview of peer tutor training strategies at German medical schools

*Ein Überblick über Trainingsstrategien für Peer-Tutoren an deutschen medizinischen Fakultäten*Simone Alvarez^{1,*}, Kathrin Dethleffsen², Tobias Esper³, Astrid Horneffer⁴, Kirsten Reschke⁵, Jobst-Hendrik Schultz¹¹ Clinic for General Internal Medicine and Psychosomatics, University Clinic Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany² LMU Co.Med, Medical Faculty, LMU Munich, Germany³ Medical Interprofessional Training Center, Medical Faculty Carl Gustav Carus, Technical University Dresden, Germany⁴ Medical Faculty, Dean's Office, Ulm University, Germany⁵ University Clinic for Nephrology and Hypertension, Diabetology and Endocrinology, Magdeburg University, Germany

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ABSTRACT

Background: An increased popularity of peer-assisted learning in medical schools all over the globe has caused a growing interest in taking a closer look into how student tutors are trained to handle the task. This article provides an overview of the tutor training strategies at five medical faculties in Germany.**Methods:** Nine German medical faculties with an evident tutor training strategy were contacted by phone or e-mail. Ultimately, five of the nine contacted faculties responded and provided a detailed overview of their individual tutor training.**Results:** In many cases, tutors receive a mandatory didactic training in preparation of the tutorials and also an additional technical or specialized training. Frequently, tutor training is provided within the framework of an organized, faculty-based tutor training program. There is a trend towards a needs-adapted training strategy.**Conclusion:** There is a broad variety of peer teaching and tutor training strategies at the various faculties surveyed. Their individual characteristics are determined by factors such as the nature of tutorials and the number of students.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Hintergrund: Die zunehmende Popularität von Peer Assisted Learning in der medizinischen Ausbildung auf der ganzen Welt legt es nahe, sich bereits vorhandene Ausbildungskonzepte für studentische Tutoren anzuschauen und zu erheben, wie Tutoren für ihre Aufgabe ausgebildet werden. Dieser Artikel soll einen Überblick über verschiedene Trainingsstrategien für Tutoren am Beispiel von ausgewählten Fakultäten geben.**Methoden:** Neun deutsche Fakultäten mit einer ausgewiesenen Tutoren-Trainingsstrategie wurden per Telefon oder E-Mail kontaktiert. Fünf der neun kontaktierten Fakultäten gaben Rückmeldung und lieferten einen detaillierten Überblick über ihre jeweilige Tutorenausbildung.**Resultate:** Alle Tutoren der befragten Fakultäten erhalten eine Art obligatorische didaktische Ausbildung in Vorbereitung auf die Tutorien. In vielen Fällen werden zusätzlich technische und/oder fachspezifische Trainings angeboten. Zunehmend werden Tutoren auch im Rahmen von organisierten, fakultätsgesteuerten Tutor-Trainingsprogrammen ausgebildet. Es zeichnet sich ein Trend hin zu einer bedarfsorientierten Ausbildung ab.**Schlussfolgerungen:** An den befragten Fakultäten existieren verschiedenste Tutoren-Trainingskonzepte, deren individuelle Charakteristika von Faktoren wie Tutoren-Einsatzgebiete und Studierendenzahl bestimmt werden.* Corresponding author: Simone Alvarez, Clinic for General Internal Medicine and Psychosomatics, University Clinic Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany.
E-mail: Simone.alvarez@med.uni-heidelberg.de (S. Alvarez).

Introduction

Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) is an educational strategy which has become increasingly popular in medical education during the last two decades [1–3]. PAL involves students being taught by peers, usually within the context of small group teaching formats. It is used in the pre-clinical as well as in the clinical part of studies and at medical schools all over the globe tutorials have become an integral part of the curriculum. Peer tutors typically work in problem-based (PBL) or skills-based curricula, [4–6] but sometimes also in seminar and lecture based courses [30]. As described abundantly in the literature, there are many advantages of PAL for students and tutors alike, but medical schools also profit from a PAL since it is known to alleviate teaching burden and save faculty resources [7–15]. Studies about the effectiveness of tutoring in the training of clinical skills show that trained peer tutors can be as effective as faculty in teaching procedural clinical skills [4,5].

However, information about how peer tutors are trained for this task is not as plentiful. Even though PAL is frequently used and studies have shown that tutor training is vital for tutor success, formal trainings in the form of structured training programs are very much a recent phenomenon. Efforts have been made to create standardized training programs [16] and evaluations of the few programs described are largely positive, but reports of specific training concepts remain limited.

Just as many of their international counterparts, medical faculties in Germany use PAL to facilitate teaching and learning. Existing reports on PAL training in Germany suggest a large diversity in training strategies [17]. Frequently, peer tutors entrusted with teaching tasks receive a technical training in preparation of their tutorials and often also a basic training in didactical skills [18–23]. Yet, only few PAL training concepts are published. This article aims to fill this gap and promote discussion about different tutor training strategies and therefore provides a comprehensive overview of tutor training strategies at five medical faculties in Germany with a history of PAL.

Material and methods

At the beginning of the study phase, websites and publications were screened for descriptions of tutor training programs at German faculties. The screening was conducted independently by four different researchers and research assistants over a time frame of about four months. The search included terms such as “tutor training” and “tutor program”, “didactic training”, and “skills training” in varying order and combination. Many faculties with tutor training programs were identified, and the information collected points to a wide variety of tutor employment and subsequent tutor training approaches among medical faculties. To narrow the focus of the investigation, a team of three researchers ultimately selected nine faculties for the purpose of the study. These faculties were to represent a cross section of smaller and larger tutor training programs in Germany. The faculties were then contacted by phone or email and asked to provide a detailed outline of their individual tutor training strategy. To ensure structured information, a survey form was sent to each faculty via Email. On this form, faculty representatives were to give information about structure and particularities of their tutor trainings, differentiating between basic, specialized and possible additional trainings. They were also asked to provide information on tutor trainers, opportunity for tutors to obtain certificates, tutor payment, and, if applicable, any further specifics at the given faculty.

Out of the nine faculties contacted, the following five agreed to contribute to this overview with a description of their particular tutor training structure: Medical Faculty of Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich (LMU Co.Med), Medical Faculty of Ulm University (“Train-the-Tutor”), Medical Faculty of Ruprecht-Karls University Heidelberg (QPT), Medical Interprofessional Training Center (MITZ) at Medical Faculty Carl Gustav Carus of Technical University Dresden, and Medical Faculty of Otto-von-Guericke University Magdeburg. The remaining four faculties were unable to provide the required information within the timeframe of this study. The information provided was processed by a researcher and a research assistant, and again verified by the individual authors of this article.

Results

In the following, the PAL training structure of each of the five faculties is described according to the categories of the survey. Further details of the content of the various trainings are provided in the [appendix](#).

Medical Faculty Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich

At the medical faculty of the LMU PAL is used in curricular mandatory courses as well as extracurricular voluntary courses. In curricular settings during the pre-clinical phase tutors work in many practical courses under direct supervision of the educator in charge. During the clinical phase of medical education PAL is used in different formats. Here, tutors act more independently to some degree but still with constant educator support. The various pre-clinical and clinical medical institutes select and train their tutors directly. The content and scope of the trainings vary.

In the following the voluntary extracurricular peer teaching program provided by LMU Co.Med (“Curriculumsoptimierung Medizin”) is described [30]. This program offers various student-led tutorials as voluntary courses in addition to the formal curriculum and aims to promote the personalization of medical education based on the individual needs of students. It consists of subject specific and interdisciplinary tutorials that address all natural scientific, physiological and anatomical subjects of the pre-clinical curriculum, as well as tutorials with contents exceeding the formal curriculum and electives. In addition selected courses are offered in the clinical part of the curriculum. The so-called near-peer tutors of the program are almost always students of the same academic program. Hereby the educational distance of the tutors compared to the students taught is not necessarily reflected in a higher semester, but rather in a measurable knowledge advance of the student teacher, for example in terms of a successfully completed assessment or a successfully attended course in which the tutees have not yet successfully participated. The tutor training is divided into the so-called workplace-based training and intensive training.

Basic training

The workplace-based training (basic training) is carried out preparatory as well as concomitantly to subject-specific tutorials. It aims to provide the didactical and subject-specific qualification enabling tutors to plan and lead tutorials independently and to a high qualitative standard. The training includes didactic and rhetoric elements as well as an individual subject-based supervision and support, simulated tutorials and feedback sessions. In addition, each training includes at least one consultation of the

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