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Medical students learning experiences of the labour ward: a qualitative research study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To study the educational value to medical students of a labour ward rotation.

Design: Qualitative research study was performed in two tertiary level obstetric hospitals attached to a large medical school in Dublin. Medical students attending a six-week rotation in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in University College Dublin were invited to participate. As part of this rotation, students spend one week as part of the clinical team working on the labour ward. Focus groups were held in order to identify common themes and experiences of medical students during this labour ward week. Grounded theory with thematic analysis was used. The main outcome measures were the educational experience and value of a labour ward rotation to medical students.

Results: Five distinct themes developed from the focus groups of 19 students. A high value was placed on patient centred bedside teaching. Midwives were identified as excellent teachers and facilitators of learning. There was a clear sense of teamwork and belonging by the students. However, students reported frustration with unclear learning objectives. Students identified extra pre-learning with pre-specified learning aims before the labour ward week as being important.

Conclusion: Bedside teaching was highly valued as it advanced student's knowledge of obstetrics theory and improved communication skills. In general, medical students reported a positive experience from working in the labour ward but there is scope for improvement.

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Introduction

The safe delivery of a mother and baby is a joy. Spending time on a labour ward as a medical student introduces doctors-to-be to normal labour, and to the privilege of being involved in a woman's care at one of the most special time in her life. After years of teaching by scientists and medical academics, it is often the first time that the students are taught directly by midwives, who work as independent practitioners and teach students the normal and abnormal variants of labour. Much of the research in this area focuses on midwives experiences of teaching medical students, or patient's perceptions [1–4]. A successful teaching strategy should also involve the experiences of medical students, including determining whether learning objectives were achieved.

The aim of this study was evaluate medical student's experience of both the labour ward placement and the teaching they experienced.

Materials and methods

Medical students in University College Dublin study Obstetrics and Gynaecology throughout medical college, but concentrate their learning in a six-weeks hospital based rotation, normally occurring within the last 18 months of medical school. The first day of the rotation consists of an orientation to the six weeks, including a brief orientation to the labour ward. Further orientation is provided by both written documentation, online documentation and staff support.

The rotation comprises of over sixty lectures, including three video linked teaching sessions per day, bedside tutorials, ward rounds, attendance at antenatal and gynaecological clinics and at multidisciplinary weekly clinical meetings. Crucial to this teaching of the art of obstetrics is a mandatory one-week rotation on the labour ward where they work within the clinical team under the supervision of the midwifery staff. During this time students are

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expected to fully integrate into the clinical team working in each eight-hour shift on the ward (including nights), and to assist the midwifery staff to care for women in labour and after delivery. Students are also expected to complete anonymous summaries of six women in labour for discussion at the end of the six-weeks rotation. At the end of the six-weeks each student meets with a member of staff to provide feedback on both the positive and negative aspects of the entire six-weeks module. In addition, an external assessor reviews the course content and interviews students on a yearly basis to provide a written external assessment of the module.

For this study, following completion of the one-week labour ward rotation, students were invited to give feedback of their experiences as medical students on the labour ward. Consenting students attended a focus group that aimed to obtain a more in-depth representation of student's experiences. A medical student with a background in psychology (DC) led the focus group. DC was a member of the previous student group and students attending the focus group were unknown to her. While this was not meant to be an assessment of teaching, suggestions aimed to improve the experience for other students were welcomed. Grounded theory was used, with thematic analysis. Multiple focus groups were planned until saturation of data. An interview schedule with twelve baseline questions was developed (defined in Table 1) and led by a facilitator. Positive and negative aspects of the experience were discussed followed by a recommendation of various approaches that could be used to improve learning experiences. Each group session lasted approximately 45 min.

The settings were the two tertiary level university hospitals with 9000+ deliveries per annum, the National Maternity Hospital and the Coombe Women's and Children's University Hospital. Both hospitals are associated with University College Dublin and provide undergraduate teaching to medical, midwifery and nursing students from the university. Formal approval of the project was obtained from Ethics Committee of University College Dublin.

Results

Nineteen students were interviewed in focus groups until thematic saturation was reached. No differences were identified between males and female students, nor between the students attending different hospitals.

Five distinct themes were identified—the value of patient centred care in education, midwives as excellent teachers and facilitators, a feeling of teamwork and belonging, the frustration of unclear learning goals and a wish for specific pre-rotation learning interventions.

Students placed a high value on bedside teaching as it advanced both their knowledge of obstetrics as well as their communication skills. *“Everyone felt like they got a lot out of it . . . it was helpful for reinforcing knowledge, being there and seeing it”*. Some practiced their practical skills *“You got to practice things like taking a blood pressure”*. For others, a particular topic pertaining to a patient augmented their education *“Everyone learns something different from their patient—like the patient I was with had gestational diabetes . . . when you go to study a topic later its already in your head”*. Notably, because the care was patient centred, and the students stayed with the patient for the duration of the patients time on the labour ward (or duration of the students shift, whichever was shorter), the students believed that their communication skills improved *“At the start I was very nervous being with one couple for a time, but it was fine!”* *“Good for learning how to communicate with patients”*.

Midwives were respected as both excellent teachers and facilitators of learning. Students' comments included that *“. . . the midwives were very willing to teach medical students as they are used to students on the labour ward”*. Equally midwives were conscious of the limited time the medical students had on the labour ward. *“They were understanding of time constraints of the labour ward, putting you with a multiparous women or calling you out to see other deliveries”*.

Table 1

The interview schedule for the focus groups consisting of twelve baseline questions, with supported talking points and probing questions.

Engagement question

1. What was your general impression of the labour ward? Enthusiastic teachers, patients? What might have contributed to this atmosphere

Exploration questions

2. What were your expectations of the labour ward?
3. How were your expectations met?
4. How could they be better met?
5. How useful did you find your time on the labour ward?
 - a. What specific skills, abilities or experiences did you gain?
6. What was your favourite part of the week?
7. What are the strengths of placement?
8. What are the disappointments/weaknesses of the week on the labour ward?
9. How can we improve the time on the labour ward for medical students?
10. If you could change anything about your week on the labour ward what would it be?

Exit questions

11. Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience on the labour ward? (Why you liked/disliked it?)
12. Of all things discussed today, what do you think is most important?
 - Have we missed anything?

Other talking points

- Attendance through the whole week versus how they felt it benefited them?
- Any pre-learning that was done and how they feel it benefited them? E.g. labour ward on week 1 versus labour ward on week 6?

Probes

- Can you talk more about that?/Please tell me more about that
- Help me understand what you mean by that . . .
- Can you give an example of that
- Could you explain what you mean by that
- Can you tell me something else about that

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