

PRACTICE

How to make a nicer doctor

For medical students, residents and practising physicians, interpersonal skills are becoming as important as medical knowledge

BY CLEA MACHOLD

The teaching of interpersonal skills—civility, compassion and empathy—has traditionally been ignored in medical school in favour of a focus on academic learning. However, curriculum is changing to make interpersonal skills a priority and, now, an online test developed at McMaster University's Michael G. DeGroot School of Medicine in Hamilton is helping medical schools identify applicants with desired personality traits and interpersonal skills.

Created by the medical school's admissions committee, this 90-minute situational judgment test is called CASPer (short for the Computer-based Assessment for Sampling Personal Characteristics). It allows the school to test for and accept students whose character complements their cognitive abilities—and to groom better, more balanced doctors.

Five years after CASPer was deployed at McMaster, the first cohort's results are now available for analysis by the test's creators. "The exit survey results from applicants demonstrate that two-thirds to three-quarters feel that CASPer is a more fair and more accurate way of portraying an applicant's personal characteristics," said Dr. Harold Reiter, the former admissions chair at McMaster's medical school and one of CASPer's creators.

Although CASPer doesn't feel personal the way a traditional interview does, the data are clear in terms of predictive validity. "Whether you intuit the results or not, the traditional interview, which feels so deep, has no capacity for predicting future performance, whereas CASPer does," Dr. Reiter said. By emphasizing the importance of interpersonal skills when people are admitted to medical school, there's a greater chance that those accepted will have the personal characteristics to become good doctors. That said, interpersonal skills are increasingly emphasized throughout a physician's training and career.

Predicting personal characteristics

"Until about 13 years ago, there would have been no (reliable) tool used for selection of students on the basis of their personal characteristics," said Dr. Reiter. However, two methods have been developed since then.

One of these is the multiple mini interview, an in-person measure of personal and professional characteristics that McMaster started using in 2004. The other is CASPer. "The difficulty and limitation of the MMI is that you can only give it to those people who are coming to interview," Dr. Reiter explained. This means that, at the majority of Canadian medical schools, initial applicants are judged on academic merit alone.

Still, not everyone believes that CASPer is as accurate as Dr. Reiter claims. Ben Schwartzentruber, a third-year medical student at the University of British Columbia, took CASPer in October 2012. "It was hard to see what they would have learned about me from that test," he said. "Me watching a video and typing something on my screen while interacting under a stressful situation through the Internet with something that I know not to be a true human being is a

different experience than interacting with a human being."

Dr. Reiter said he welcomes this perspective, but that the overall sense from the applicants and those scoring the responses paints a different picture.

And, what's more, the process seems to be catching on. The Northern Ontario School of Medicine piloted CASPer as part of this year's admissions cycle, though the results weren't used in the 2015 selection process. The University of Ottawa's faculty of medicine, two U.S. programs (New York Medical College and Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School) and four nursing schools in Ontario (McMaster, York, Conestoga and Mohawk) will start using CASPer next year.

Teaching interpersonal skills

Revising curricula to reflect an emphasis on interpersonal skills is widely considered important by medical education experts. Problem is, it's far more challenging to teach personal characteristics than medical expertise. Still,



Dr. Reiter

integration of interpersonal skill education into curricula is taking place throughout the country.

The University of British Columbia's faculty of medicine is making adjustments when it comes to teaching and evaluating interpersonal skills. "We're in early days of realizing we should make (interpersonal) skills a part of the medical curriculum," said Schwartzentruber. "But we haven't totally figured out how to translate that into useful forms in the medical education."

There is one interpersonal skills project Schwartzentruber has been happy with that started in 2013. Initially under the guidance of Dr. Shafiq Dharamsi, an associate professor in UBC's faculty of medicine, Schwartzentruber's project focuses on the experiences of physicians in B.C.'s Lower Mainland relating to burnout, resilience and the interaction of these with empathy using qualitative research interviews.

According to Dr. Reiter, McMaster's medical school is also making an effort to hone



In 2014, 4,973 students applied to McMaster University's medical school. Of these, 552 were interviewed, but only 206 were accepted. If it wasn't for CASPer, 4,421 would have been eliminated based solely on marks, without the consideration of personal or professional characteristics.

students' interpersonal skills by integrating "professional competencies" into the curriculum across each school year.

The values of civil behaviour

Developing competency in interpersonal skills is a life-long commitment. In 2010, the Ontario Medical Association launched the Physician Workplace Support Program (now part of its Physician Health Program), which helps doctors manage complaints about their behaviour. Dr. Michael Kaufmann, medical director of the program and a practising doctor, has dealt with hundreds of "misbehaving physicians," but he said civility—that is, learning how to communicate with other people respectfully—is the best way to encourage the kind of behaviour these doctors should practice.

According to Dr. Kaufmann, civility needs to be identified at the time of application to medical school, as well as taught in the classroom. "Medical training programs need to have the courage to fail students (who)

are unable to demonstrate that they've learned these principles and behaviours," he said. And initiatives like the Physician Health Program should be present in all provinces to help older doctors, very late in their training trajectory, who have previously demonstrated disruptive or unprofessional behaviour.

When Dr. Kaufmann began working at the OMA's Physician Health Program in 1995, little attention was paid to the health, well-being and particular mannerisms of practitioners. "We were mostly caught up with learning the knowledge and skills necessary to do our work and apply it," he added. Over the years, research about how important it is that doctors look after themselves, as well as their patients, has continued to develop. As such, for medical students, residents and physicians, interpersonal skills are becoming a focus—something that, in time, may adjust the composition of doctors in this country and the future of medicine in Canada. MP