

Medical Education at Mt. Hope

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The Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS) at the expansive Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex at Mt. Hope began to offer doctorate programmes in the Schools of Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, and Dentistry in 1989. In 1995, a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in Pharmacy was introduced, and the full complement of programmes proposed by the founding fathers will soon be in progress with the inauguration of the BSc in Nursing, in January 2005.

The founding fathers of the FMS at Mt. Hope were extremely futuristic when laying the foundation for the teaching methods that were to be instituted at the faculty. There was apparent dissatisfaction with methods of teaching in medical schools in those early days, and the founding fathers felt that the medical school in Trinidad should reflect the new ideas that were promulgated at that time. As a result, even the design of the laboratories, amphitheatres, and seminar rooms was taken into consideration at the outset. The amphitheatres are utilised for large-group teaching and the seminar rooms for small-group teaching. Even the language of teaching in FMS has its own peculiarities!

In all programmes at the FMS, teaching is divided into three major components—pre-clinical, para-clinical, and clinical. In the pre-clinical years, problem-based learning (PBL) is the preferred method of instruction. In this method, students are placed in small groups to ponder on a medical “problem.” This problem, for example, could describe information on a patient from the report of a doctor, dentist, or pharmacist, or from a veterinarian on an animal manifesting certain clinical signs. In small groups, the learning activity involves analysis and hypothesis generating among the students under the guidance of a facilitator, until the students finally resort to textbooks, the library, the Internet, or resource persons to tease out the relevant areas of Biochemistry, Pathology, Anatomy, and Physiology embedded in the problem.

Teaching in a Skills Laboratory allows students to practise on models, kits, plastinated specimens, and simulated patients. Specialist clinicians conduct this training so that students can attain competence at clinical skills before they begin to interact with “real” patients. In addition, librarians at the Medical Sciences Library also become intimately involved in supporting the teaching. Along with other reading resources, the librarians identify audiovisual and electronic resources for students, and conduct training programmes for staff and students in information management.

A case in point occurs at the School of Veterinary Medicine. The main aim of veterinary education is to emphasise the development and promotion of the livestock industry across the Caribbean. However, there has never been an abundance of livestock farms in Trinidad to provide the Veterinary Hospital in the

Complex with the ample range of clinical material required as resources for teaching the students pursuing the doctorate in veterinary medicine. Quite early, therefore, a challenge to providing adequate resources for the clinical teaching of Food Animal Medicine emerged. Concerted efforts to explore existing and potential resources to achieve the objectives of clinical teaching had to be undertaken. The exploration resulted in a rotation of students throughout different types of farms and livestock enterprises in Trinidad, namely, the Faculty of Agriculture farm at UWI, the Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry farm and piggery, the Small Ruminant Unit at Centeno Livestock Station, the Mon Jaloux Caroni (1975) livestock farm, the Aripo Station with buffalo herd and dairy unit, the Artificial Breeding Centre and artificial insemination service, and a number of privately owned dairy farms with milking herds.

This Food Animal Clinical Rotation now provides an environment for small groups of students to develop the diagnostic and fundamental technical skills required for food animal practice. In addition, students integrate the knowledge of preventive medicine, animal production, and health management in evaluating the health and productivity status of livestock enterprises. The teaching strategies used include discussion of cases, analysis of farm records, as well as case presentations on selected animals that are encountered in the field.

In general, veterinary education is supplemented by ambulatory teaching where students must visit facilities—farms, kennels, wildlife sanctuaries, or horse racing tracks—to observe practices and to understand how to maintain the health of various species. One benefit of this type of community-oriented curriculum is that it brings students into contact with the real issues existing in the field. The Food Animal Clinical (Ambulatory) Rotation therefore exemplifies this model. Challenges to teaching in an ambulatory setting will surface however; for example, the challenge of returning to the School on time with a suitable mindset for classroom or laboratory sessions after having to travel through the traffic from the field.

Nevertheless, students and staff have occasionally evaluated this rotation, as is done for all other rotations in the clinical programmes at the Faculty. Recommendations on new approaches to medical education have usually been incorporated subsequent to these reviews.

Medical education has been coming into its own at the Mt Hope campus of UWI, with staff development programmes on technology, and teaching and assessment methods to match the various teaching methodologies in place. For the past two years, A'Level science teachers have been hosted at two-day workshops conducted by the Centre for Medical Sciences Education (CMSE) of the faculty. At these workshops, the science teachers experience a snapshot of the teaching methodologies in vogue, in the hope that they will better prepare prospective students for the variety of learning activities at FMS.

The CMSE also provides support to teaching, learning, and research, as well as to conferences and workshops at the FMS, such as the Faculty's **Second Biennial Conference – Health Sciences, Research, and Education in Focus in the Caribbean** now in progress (11-14th October, 2004). At this conference, a broad spectrum of health issues is being considered, either as oral or poster presentations. There are also workshops aimed at retooling and updating health professionals in the areas of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, and medical education.

The effort to confront challenges while attempting to deliver a quality curriculum in medical education, a stance adopted by the founding fathers, is certainly an ongoing feature of the FMS.

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