Undergraduate Curriculum Reform in Saudi Medical Schools, needed or not?

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ABSTRACT
Over the past few years there has been numerous changes in our society which may have been accompanied by minimal changes in the higher education system in the Kingdom. This has created a drive among universities to review their objectives and reappraise their respective roles in society. These objectives revolve around the mainstream of better serving the public interest, addressing the physician work force needs, coping with burgeoning medical knowledge and increasing the emphasis on technical/attitude professionalism. We feel there is a need for a national debate on these issues to produce uniformity, encourage similarities and create consensus within the university system. To initiate this debate, this article is put forth.

Keywords: Medical education, curriculum, Saudi Arabia.


One of the most important aspects of a nation's development is the development of its own people. These sentiments were put forth by the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz when he said "One of my joyest moments was when I took charge of the Ministry of Education". The King states further "Although development has included all aspects of our lives, the most important development that we strive for is the development of the Saudi Man". This vision has lead to the establishment of more than 7 universities which help millions of Saudis to begin or resume their studies in various scientific, technical and cultural areas. Furthermore, these universities have helped to validate, encourage and foster sciences that are particularly important to the community. At the forefront of these is medicine and the related specialties. Each of the medical schools were given a specific objective to achieve. These colleges have done remarkably well. Many of the Saudi graduates from medical and dental schools have sailed smoothly through their postgraduate programs to achieve leading positions in this country.

There has been many scientific, socioeconomic and regional changes that prompted the examination of the curriculum in the medical schools. Some faculty members considered the curriculum obsolete and needed fundamental changes that should include not only course contents but also course objectives, duration, teaching methodology and evaluation methods. Others thought the objectives were appropriate but required some change in the course contents with introduction of newer subjects and omission of older non-utility subjects. These disagreements have been so intense at times that we could not see the standards which we currently hold and the principles by which we judge our faculty members and medical students. In fact, these disagreements are not new or unique to one university. The Saudi colleges and universities with limited resources have been engaged in attempts to admit large numbers of students of various socioeconomic backgrounds to new areas of learning and new sets of instructional methods. These attempts lead to intense struggles between Universities over admission policies and criteria, the
depth and breadth of the curricula. This document is produced in an attempt to clarify some of these issues.

General Objectives and Functions of Universities. Universities are centers for teaching the methods necessary to learn the basis of new information, theories, research, techniques and acquire novel approaches as well as disposition of necessary methods to criticize objectively, question and test scientific hypotheses. The purpose of a university should not be simply to multiply the numbers of professional men and women whether physicians, nurses, etc but to be a grand center of intellectual growth for all people, being the source of light for every kind of knowledge. These objectives and functions could not occur in a vacuum. The universities must concentrate on the relevance of the scientific endeavor to local needs. Therefore, the functions of institutions for higher studies should be to stretch the boundaries of understanding and teach the young to value our intellectual heritage, not by rote, but by thorough comprehension and examination to continually and perpetually subject all forms of wisdom to thoughtful scrutiny, taking from which what is important to the local society to produce knowledgeable and intellectual professionals who are highly skilled in their specialties and appreciative of their local cultural needs and beliefs with an international awareness.

Are there any things that need to be changed in today's universities? The answer is probably yes. There are things that need to change. We need to bring together various parts of learning more closer and develop them fully to have more appropriately sequenced courses that build on one another. We need to minimize the use of inaccessible language "jargon" whenever this is possible, particularly in those fields where "jargon" has become a way of life. We need to make a greater effort to communicate with colleagues in other disciplines, with students, and with the general public. Opening such communication channels will immensely help developing not only the university locally but the community at large. We need to ensure that teaching ability is considered seriously in recruiting all the faculty personnel. In addition, we need to learn how to respond to the considerable challenges of teaching the highest number and the widest range body of students in the history of the Kingdom in higher education. The appropriate authorities need to provide the necessary infrastructure for such a change in each individual university emphasizing productivity, benefit and service to society as the yard stick by which the university success is measured. The appropriate authorities need to provide the necessary consultation from abroad to help see that the proposed changes match international standards. The authorities should create the environment necessary in each university for each faculty member to have a sense of belonging and pride to the university and the community he/she serves. Although these changes are important at the university level, a closer look at the medical curriculum and the undergraduate level is also needed.

Objectives of the curriculum. The main objective of medical schools is to provide the society with competent physicians who are aware of the needs of society and practices within the realms of medical ethics. Medical Schools in Saudi Universities have worked hard to add other objectives that are set by proxy rather than written in the by-laws book. These include the cultivation of curiosity in individual students, the development of the critical ability not only for competence but also for excellence in medicine, providing the medical students with wider perspective of their potential and lastly but most importantly developing the very way we approach and solicit knowledge.

Recently, several surveys were carried out in the College of Medicine and Medical Sciences (CMMS) at King Faisal University (KFU) at various levels to see if any form of change is needed and to examine some of the local trends. Notwithstanding the reasons for these surveys, the results showed that there should be "an evolution rather than a revolution". An appraisal of simple facts need to be clarified and appreciated. Factors that have been identified to effect these changes include: (1) More than one person is needed to change the curriculum. This means a collaborative and cooperative effort has to be created in order for positive results to be seen. (2) The political will has to be supportive of the intended change. This necessitates ample timing and discussions with appropriate officials. (3) The provision of resources that are fundamentally needed for the change. Once these factors are secured, the ingredients for success are there.

Proposed solutions includes:- (1) Ensure that the curriculum committee devotes its activities and time specifically to the purpose it is formed for namely the curriculum. It is therefore necessary that the committee is not assigned multiple tasks. Hence, there would be a more focused comprehensive and closer look at the medical school curriculum. (2) Have the bulk of the curriculum committee formed by senior Saudi professors with impeccable record and vested interest in developing the medical curriculum. (3) Enhance the authoritative and administrative status of the Committee by including the Vice Deans for Academic and Clinical Affairs to the Curriculum Committee. (4) Concentrate on
practical changes in the curriculum that are adoptable under the current obligations and constraints. (5) Emphasize clinically relevant subjects and materials at very early phases of a medical student's career. (6) Introduce clinical subjects at earlier stages in the medical student career. (7) Modify the curriculum in a way conducive of longer proctor-student and student-patient contacts. (8) Introduce new subjects that may help students develop practical skills to participate/manage the evergrowing medical research and knowledge. (9) Emphasize and encourage student's initiative of lifelong, self-learning and independence. (10) Secure private funding that may be needed in the development of the new curricula.

The institutions of higher education in any nation are always a faithful mirror in which the national identity and character are sharply reflected. The Saudi universities and colleges should accommodate themselves to significant changes in their own character to reflect the change in the character of the people for whom they exist. In our country the action and reaction between the university and society at large are more sensitive and slower than in other communities. Therefore, the envisaged change in the university curriculum of this nation is expected to be gradual.

However, the intended changes in higher education do not come from ivory towers nor from armchair academics but should be the result of fundamental scientific and cultural transformation that relate to the need of the people and the society. The proposed solutions are intended to perhaps pave and shorten the rocky and long road to positive change.

References