

Original Research Article**Newspaper as a tool for learning Community Medicine:
An exploratory study**

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Abstract

Basic objective of the MBBS course is to produce doctors to meet the health needs of the community. Hence community medicine is given importance. Students find this subject dry and boring. Teaching community medicine should be made relevant to daily life and activities. Innovative ways need to be developed to make the subject more meaningful. The present study explored the feasibility of using newspaper articles to explore different aspects of community medicine. Volunteering sixth term students of a medical college in Bangalore, South India, participated in the study. Study was conducted using email and internet between May and June 2012. Students were asked to read newspapers and submit articles, which they felt were relevant to community medicine. Twenty articles were submitted. Articles were selected to cover variety of topics. Six articles covering five chapters were selected and a schedule was drawn and intimated to students through emails. The article was e-mailed to the students, their response obtained through an online survey and then a discussion on the article was again e-mailed to the student. Finally a feedback was taken about the activity. Twenty eight students out of seventy eight participated. Students enjoyed this novel way of learning community medicine and wanted it to be continued for their junior batches and also wanted it to be included as a form of assessment. It is feasible to use the 'newspaper' as an effective tool, for better understanding the subject of community medicine. Use of the modern communication methods makes this activity cost effective and also removes time constraints. Better planning of the format of the survey and group discussion would make the activity more structured and also allow for assessment of the learning which takes place.

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1. Introduction

The basic objective of the undergraduate medical course is to produce doctors to meet the health needs of the community. Hence the subject of community medicine is given lot of importance in the medical curriculum in India. Students find

the subject of community medicine dry and boring because they are not able to relate the applicability of community medicine to daily life. Hence innovative ways of teaching and learning need to be developed to make the subject more interesting to the student. An attempt has been made in this study to explore the feasibility of

using newspaper as a tool for learning community medicine in a medical school.

2. Materials and methods

The study was conducted among the volunteering sixth term students of Kempegowda Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS), Bangalore, South India, during May and June 2012. Newspaper articles, emails and online surveys were the tools used for the study. The email addresses of all the sixth term students were collected. Students of sixth term were asked to submit articles from newspapers which they felt had some connection to the subject of community medicine. The students submitted 20 articles. The investigator selected six articles from the 20 submitted in such a way that topics from different chapters could be discussed. A schedule was drawn up to post the articles to the students and get responses from them. This schedule (Table 1) was first emailed to all the students of the sixth term. For example, the

first article which was posted was 'Why Purnima died after giving birth in a Park in Bangalore.' This article dealt with the very important topic of 'maternal mortality' which is very high in our country. The article was posted on 14th May 2012 to the students. The student had to read the article and go to the link provided at the end of the article and answer questions in the form of an online survey by 17th May 2012. The questions asked in the online survey were, what the students felt on reading the article, from the article what were the issues they could relate to community medicine and what solutions they could think of to solve the issues. Only the students who answered the survey were posted a discussion prepared by the investigator on the topic on 18th May 2012. The same pattern was followed for the remaining five topics. The questions asked in the online survey for all the topics were the same. Finally a direct feedback on paper was taken about the whole activity from the students who had participated. The feedback data were analyzed.

Table 1: Schedule for posting articles

Chapter to which the article is related to and name of newspaper article	Date for posting the article	Date by which the student should complete online survey to the survey	Date of posting discussion to the students who responded
Maternal and child health 'Why Purnima died after giving birth in a park'	14 May 2012	17 May 2012	18 May 2012
Non communicable disease 'SUV mows down sleeping man'	19 May 2012	22 May 2012	23 May 2012
Environment 'Half of India's homes have cellphones, but not toilets'	24 May 2012	27 May 2012	28 May 2012
Social sciences 'Barefoot: Death on the streets'	29 May 2012	1 June 2012	2 June 2012
Communicable disease 'Don't ignore the adults - Malaria'	3 June 2012	6 June 2012	7 June 2012
Social sciences 'Barefoot - The other side of life (Poverty Line)'	8 June 2012	11 June 2012	12 June 2012

3. Results

This study was conducted as an exploratory study, to check the feasibility of using the newspaper as a learning tool. From the class of 78 students only 23 students participated in the activity and gave feedback. Nineteen out of twenty three students (83%) agreed that this kind of learning made them think about the various related topics of community medicine. Eighteen (78%) agreed that this method was a more holistic way of learning community medicine. Nineteen (83%) agreed that this type of learning made them search for more information on the topic. Twelve (52%) agreed that this type of learning helped them to look at day to day problems in new light. Thirteen (57%) strongly agreed that this was an exciting way to learn community medicine. Fourteen (61%) agreed that this activity should be continued for the junior batches. Fourteen (61%) disagreed that this activity was a waste of time. Fourteen (61%) agreed that this activity improved their newspaper reading habit. What the students liked about the activity was the applied learning involved and the novel way of looking at problems. They felt it was a nice and practical way to learn community medicine and they also liked the online survey method that was used. What they did not like was, many felt that the schedule was very tight and more time should have been given. They disliked the part that there was no open discussion and they also felt the individual discussions posted was too long. They also felt more specific questions related to the topics should have been asked. The most important hurdle faced by them was poor internet connectivity at the time of the study due to construction activity in the institution which resulted in the communication lines being disconnected. Suggestions given by students to improve this activity included making the schedule less tightly packed, spreading the activity over a period of one year, have an open discussion which is seen by all the students, to ask more specific questions on the topics rather than common questions for all the topics. Many also

suggested making it a compulsory activity and introducing assessment and marks which would be counted in formative assessment.

4. Discussion

In the monograph published by the University of South Carolina's National Resource Centre, Gardner and Sullivan are of the opinion that using national newspapers in classrooms promotes critical thinking.¹ According to them, critical thinking abilities can only be developed if students are exposed to stimulating information about which probing questions can and must be asked and if they are provided examples of critical reasoning as manifested in the printed word. They also say that this skill is also developed by exposure to a blend and balance of widely differing opinions most likely to be found only in national newspapers. Newspaper is the best place to observe this practice through the juxtaposition of factual presentations with opinion and editorial pieces written by world class thinkers representing various political and social constituencies.

Sixth term students were chosen, since at KIMS, by sixth term most of the chapters in community medicine have already been taught to the students and the investigator felt they would have a better understanding of the subject by then, and since it would be the subject in which they would be taking their next examination, their interest also would be better to explore this form of learning. Making the students submit subject related articles from newspapers, was expected to help the students to develop the habit of reading newspapers and also it was an attempt at self-directed learning to enhance their learning and understanding of the subject. As all the students who participated felt it was a good way to learn the subject, the investigator is of the opinion, that this type of learning can be effectively implemented as a learning tool in the curriculum while teaching community medicine. Use of modern communication methods of emails and

online surveys makes the whole process cost effective and also constraints of fixed class room timings can be overcome. During the period of the study, due to construction activity, there was internet disruption at KIMS, which was one of the reasons, for the decreased participation by the students. This situation was beyond the control of the investigator. It being the first time, such an activity was being done, many students had difficulty in understanding the whole process and hence the poor participation.

With better planning a google group or community medicine blog can be started. This would have given a platform for more healthy discussions, critical thinking and opinions from the students. In this study due to time constraints, it was not done. As suggested by the students, this method of learning can be incorporated into the teaching curriculum without disruption to the time table being presently practiced. With a structured format, a form of assessment can also be planned.

5. Conclusion

It is feasible to use the 'newspaper' as an effective tool, for better understanding the subject of community medicine and also to relate the applicability of community medicine to daily

life. Use of the modern communication methods makes this activity cost effective and also removes time constraints. Better planning of the format of the survey and group discussion would make the activity more structured and also allow for assessment of the learning which takes place.

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Reference

1. Gardner JN, Sullivan BL (undated). The national newspaper as a tool for educational empowerment: Origins and rationale, University of South Carolina's national resource centre monograph number 28.

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