

## **Enhancing Medical Students' Attitudes & Knowledge about Disabilities**

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Although the goal of rehabilitation has been to help people with disabilities “live happily and productively on the same level as and with the same opportunities as their neighbors,” several studies have shown that physicians believe that individuals with severe disabilities have a poor quality of life. In contrast, our previous research, conducted on individuals with severe neuromuscular diseases, indicates that many severely disabled individuals perceive that they have a high quality of life. This discrepancy in opinion has been shown to alter the care that a person with a severe disability receives.

The goals of this project were to have medical students assess their perception of the life satisfaction of individuals with severe neuromuscular diseases; to determine if their attitude would affect their potential treatment; and to assess their knowledge of the physical, mental, social and vocational needs of persons who are severely disabled. To accomplish these goals, medical students had a four-week “hands on” medical rotation working with patients in rehabilitation treatment in the Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Department (PM&R). This training included a short course where materials were presented on the barriers to access faced by those with disabilities, problems in living independently with personal care assistance, how care is provided and paid for, use of assistive devices and technologic developments, sexual and reproductive health needs of the disabled, physical and substance abuse issues for wheelchair users, aging with a disability, public policy issues, and availability of national resources. The students completed a questionnaire at the beginning of their PM&R training period to provide baseline information. After exposure to the training material and four weeks of personally working with patients in rehabilitation, they repeated the questionnaire to ascertain whether the program had made a difference in their knowledge and attitudes toward disability.

The majority of medical students reported that, prior to this rehabilitation training, they were not aware of the health care needs and living concerns of individuals with disabilities. They incorrectly assumed that individuals with severe disabilities have low self-esteem, negative attitudes, and feelings of failure and

uselessness. In addition, they had a limited understanding of what it means to live with a disability (i.e., barriers encountered, risks to health, understanding the concept of independent living with personal care assistance, knowledge of resources available, and the laws and rights of individuals with disabilities).

The training program changed the attitude and knowledge of these future physicians toward people with disability and, surprisingly, changed their perception of their own lives. They were unaware of the housing difficulties the problems posed by the need for personal care assistants, the gynecological and abuse issues of wheelchair users and their lack of knowledge of agency resources for the disabled (SSI, SSDI, IHSS, etc.). They also found that the disabled were healthier and had an easier and more rewarding life than their original perception. After exposure to the day-to-day situations faced by the disabled, the students were more satisfied with their own housing and transportation and felt that their own lives were more interesting and more enjoyable.

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This new understanding and attitude should help them as future physicians to improve their communication with people with disabilities and improve their ability to provide better services to individuals with long-term disabilities. Identifying where gaps exist in the students' knowledge and how issues might be considered that affect health, quality of life, and community integration of individuals with long-term disabilities will provide information that can be used to complement existing coursework. The data gathered will be used to further refine the curriculum and determine whether or not the program should be replicated at other medical and nursing schools.