Reducing health disparities: The social role of medical schools

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Abstract

Introduction: Medical education based on the principles of social medicine can contribute toward reducing health disparities through the “creation” of doctors who are more involved in community programs.

Purpose: This study compared the social medicine orientation of graduates from various medical schools in Israel.

Methods: The authors conducted an online cross-sectional survey in May 2011 among physicians who are graduates of Israeli medical schools.

Results: The study included 1050 physicians practicing medicine in Israel: 36% who are graduates from the Hebrew University, 26% from Tel Aviv University, 22% from the Technion and 16% from Ben-Gurion University. A greater percentage of physicians who studied either at the Technion or Ben-Gurion are working or have worked in the periphery (∼50% vs. ∼30% at the Hebrew and Tel Aviv Universities). Among Ben-Gurion graduates, 47% are active in social medicine programs vs. 34–38% from other schools. Among physicians active in social medicine programs, 32% of Ben-Gurion alumni estimated that their medical education greatly influenced their social medicine involvement vs. 8–15% from other schools. Hebrew University alumni described their studies as more research-oriented. In contrast, Ben-Gurion graduates described their studies as more social medicine-oriented and they exhibited more positive attitudes about the role of physicians in reducing health disparities.

Discussion: Social medicine-oriented medical education induces a socialization process reinforcing human values regarding doctor–patient relationships and produces positive attitudes among future doctors about social involvement. Findings emphasize the need to develop educational programs with this orientation and to strengthen medical schools in the periphery.