

Are Medical and Dental Students Sufficiently Trained for Promoting Smoking Cessation Skills? A Call for Intervention.

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Tobacco is the world's single most avoidable cause of death and its use has killed almost 6 million people, with nearly 80% of these deaths occurring in the low and middle-income groups of countries, including Pakistan. If the current trend continues, approximately one billion people will die during the twenty-first century because of tobacco use¹. Although tobacco in Pakistan is used in different forms such as cigarettes, chewable tobacco, tobacco snuff and water-pipe, use of cigarettes is the most popular and proved to be the most destructive of all forms of tobacco². The lack of sufficient knowledge about tobacco hazards, high promotional activities by vendors and mass media along with weak tobacco control policies further intensifies the problem of its usage.

The use of tobacco among young people continues to rise in Pakistan. The prevalence of tobacco intake in Pakistan is high, reaching up to 40.9% among middle aged males³. Over the past few years, there has been an increasing trend in Shisha smoking especially among university and college students⁴. One of the main reasons being that shisha is prepared by mixing tobacco with various fruity flavors⁵. One recent study reported 59.22% male and 22% females of the total study subjects in a university were using Shisha smoke⁴ while another recently published study reported 22.4% medical students in a medical college to be shisha smokers⁶.

Medical professionals play an important role in reducing the consumption of tobacco and in motivating and initiating attempts to quit among smokers. For this purpose, doctors are expected to have basic knowledge and skills for anti-smoking counseling and treatment for dependence and can work within their clinical settings to great effect. Furthermore, the World Health Organization asks all health professionals to act as role models for their patients⁷. A study on dentists reported that only 2/3rd rated deficiencies in their knowledge and ability regarding providing tobacco cessation messages to patients⁸. Therefore, it is important that formal anti-tobacco programmes should be incorporated into the medical and dental curriculum. This would change the attitudes of medical and dental students to have adequate knowledge about tobacco related diseases along with developing adequate skills required for promoting smoking cessation.

For this purpose the medical and dental curriculum should incorporate a simple five-step algorithm called the "5 A's" guideline developed by The US Public Health Service. According to this, clinicians are encouraged to ASK patients about their smoking status, ADVISE smokers to quit, ASSESS their readiness to quit, ASSIST them with their smoking cessation effort, and to ARRANGE for follow-up visits⁹.

Further, the students should learn the model of "5 Rs" in promoting motivation to quit smoking proposed by Agency for Health Care Policy and Research of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This includes RELEVANCE - Motivational information to a patient is more effective if it is relevant to a patient's circumstances (such as

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prior quitting experience, disease status, or health concerns). **RISKS** - The acute and long-term risks of smoking should be stressed. **REWARDS** - Encouraging the patient to identify potential benefits of quitting smoking. **ROAD BLOCKS** - Asking the patient to identify barriers or impediments to quitting and note elements of treatment that could address barriers. **REPETITION** - Repeating the motivational intervention each time an unmotivated smoker visits the clinic setting⁹.

It is strongly believed that medical and dental students trained on these guidelines would certainly be able to deliver effective tobacco control interventions for every patient they treat and thus contribute in reducing the burden of diseases known to be caused by tobacco usage.

It is most important for healthcare providers, policy makers and all stake holders to put up their best efforts to curtail this major public health problem by focusing on training of medical and dental students in tobacco use cessation.

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