



European Medical Students' Association

Association Européenne des Étudiants en Médecine

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Cultural Competence in Healthcare

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The European Medical Students' Association (EMSA) represents medical students across Europe. We envision a healthy and solidary Europe in which medical students actively promote health. EMSA empowers medical students to advocate health in all policies, excellence in medical research, interprofessional healthcare education and the protection of human rights across Europe.

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Problem statement

Globalisation is the reality of today and has led to greater exposure of cultures to each other than at any time in history. This has significant implications for medical professionals, who are encountering an increasingly diverse range of patients with varying expressions of health issues due to the influence of their social and cultural backgrounds. For example, symptoms may be presented differently, and patients' proficiency in language, beliefs, and expectations can lead to misunderstandings. Cultural competency is essential in connecting with patients and understanding their needs in specific situations. Providing equal medical care to every patient, regardless of ethnicity, background, or culture, is an ethical necessity.

Sociocultural gaps between physicians and patients can lead to wrong decisions, inadequate treatments, and wasted time, which can have permanent and even fatal consequences. These gaps are not limited to ethnicities but also affect individuals in public settings. Providing equitable health services to patients of all backgrounds requires the development of cultural competence and patient-centred care. In this context, providing proper cultural competence training to medical students is essential so that they can become culturally competent medical professionals, prepared for their daily encounters.

According to data from January 1, 2020, the 447,2 million population living in the EU consists of 37,5 million people born outside the EU (Taylan, Weber 2023), proportionally 21% of EU residents are migrants or have a migration background (Taylan, Weber 2023). 23,7 million of the population living in the EU even were non-EU citizens (European Commission, 2021). To provide effective care to this high number of patients from diverse cultural backgrounds, medical professionals must be appropriately prepared. According to Barzykowski, Bodys-Cupak and Majda (2021), skilful treatment of patients who differ in terms of culture, ethnicity, or religion requires adequate preparation.

In this context, studies have shown that African Americans are more likely than other minority groups to feel disrespected during healthcare visits, while Asian Americans are the least likely to feel understood by their doctor and are more likely to report feeling looked down upon (Georgia Health Policy Institute, 2002). Although these findings can only be transferred to Europe with limitations, they serve as an example for the issues, people with a diverse cultural background may face. They underline the urgent need to address cultural competence in medical care to ensure equitable treatment for all patients, regardless of their background.

Research in medical education has successfully shown the positive effects of training in cultural competence for medical students. Although the training varied in mode, frequency, and duration,

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students were, nevertheless, satisfied with their experiences and demonstrated significant improvements in confidence and attitudes towards culturally competent medical practice (Arruzza, Chau 2021).

Our view. Aim

Our main goal with this policy paper is to draw attention to the relevance of cultural competence in healthcare and set the groundwork for future action promoting it. As a student organisation representing more than 50.000 medical students all across Europe, we recognise the importance of cultural competency among future physicians. The respective soft skills going along with that, focus on understanding and responding to the diverse cultural and linguistic needs of patients as well as fellow healthcare providers. We advocate to further improve their ability to comprehend the cultural background one has, and with that provide the best possible treatment in line with our patients' beliefs and values.

At EMSA, we recognize the immediate need for culturally competent healthcare workers to fully utilise the potential of all-inclusive healthcare systems. These systems can provide the best possible care, tailored to patients' needs, from initial satisfaction to the end of therapeutic approaches. We have carefully examined and considered various aspects of cultural competence and are committed to promoting, spreading, and perpetuating this cycle to create a more inclusive and healthier environment in medical institutions. Improved healthcare quality can ultimately reduce health disparities, foster collaboration, and promote the creation of innovative medical institutions, leading to sustainable progress.

Promoting cultural competence is one of EMSA's main objectives. Several active exchange programmes within Europe, but also beyond its borders, are the main instrument with which we foster intercultural understanding.

We are convinced that first-hand intercultural experiences are the most effective way to ensure our future workforce is geared up to face the challenges of a culturally diverse work environment. EMSA extensively works on this aim by means of various types of international exchange between our members, faculty-based and individually, online and in person. Moreover, we provide ample support to our local levels in conducting activities designed to promote intercultural competencies among medical students. This provides students with low-threshold access to regular education on this topic. Consequently, students are enabled to keep adapting and learning because neither culture nor the sensibility towards it is static, but rather requires continuous development.

All these efforts aim at enhancing cultural understanding in a hospital setting, thereby ensuring patient-centred, high-quality healthcare, and healthcare providers who responsibly develop and maintain their cultural competency throughout their careers.

Recommendations

EMSA calls on governments and governmental organizations to...

- Reinforce structures tackling unlawful discrimination in healthcare settings.
- Allocate capital for schools and hospitals to sustain efforts on maintaining cultural competency.
- Promote and support international cooperation and exchange.

EMSA calls on the United Nations and WHO to...

- Research and prepare reports about patient registrations; backgrounds of patients, and rate of recovery (from the perspectives of hospitals).
- Apply surveys to patients and relatives to measure the rate of satisfaction with the treatments, patient care, personnel attitude, medicines and food.

EMSA calls on hospitals and healthcare professionals to...

- Train their staff in intercultural competence and anti-discrimination to improve equal healthcare, independent of a patient's skin colour, ethnicity, religion and other similar excuses that cannot be the reason for rejection of giving a healthcare service.
- Respect the specific preferences in addressing people, several medical procedures like vasectomy, and the content of medicine or hospital food that individuals feel more comfortable with, just as when patient consent is required.
- Be attentive to different understandings of cultural behaviours, gestures and mimics. In case of misunderstanding, state the situation in a polite and comprehensible way.
- Favourably have systems in place that allow for translation, in the case of language or culture barriers being encountered.
- Encourage hospital staff to take responsibility for patients with different ethnic backgrounds.
- Invite guest/registered doctors and surgeons from all around the world to work together in multiple areas.

EMSA calls on medical faculties and ministries of education to...

- Implement an internationally accepted medical curriculum with culturally and ethnically inclusive materials alongside a qualified medical education.

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- Provide sufficient amount and intensity of lectures to students that contain especially medicine information and medical terminology in other languages besides the usage of the language in many subareas of writing, speaking, listening and reading.
- Motivate students to learn other languages and use them in general life at the workplaces, for instance in hospitals and health clinics.
- Create heterogeneous lecture venues and project/study groups.
- Back up more international exchange programmes between diversified cultures and support also national exchange programmes, owing to the fact that cultures may differ between regions in the same country.
- Encourage training that will enable the teaching staff to reach or exceed a certain cultural level, in order to provide trustworthy education to students that will ensure them to be more culturally competent.

EMSA calls on EMSA and NGOs to...

- Abstain from and be against any forms of derogatory attitudes, verbally or nonverbally.
- Conduct regular meetings on cultural awareness in medicine and the protection of cultural heritage.
- Effectuate intercultural events: festivals, seminars, sessions, meetings or discussions for instance about what would have been done in a certain situation.
- Send responsible staff to schools and hospitals to train and promote cultural competence.
- Engage with relevant external stakeholders to develop projects in line with the aforementioned goals.

EMSA calls on medical students to...

- Engage in student exchanges like Erasmus to meet medical students from other countries, experience different cultures, and improve language skills.
- Attend courses on self-development in an intercultural context.
- Engage in local intercultural activities, for example by EMSA.

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