Setting Standards for Performance Assessment is a Way for Strengthening Medical Education

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The quality of each medical school will ultimately be judged by the ability of its graduates to responsibly perform in the roles the community requires of its medical practitioners. This requires responsiveness to changing needs and a commitment to a lifetime of continuing medical education. The challenge for all medical schools is to teach sufficient factual knowledge and practical skills, and also to encourage students to be enquiring, analytical and to develop desirable professional attitudes. As Self-directed learning (SDL) skills are thought to be associated with lifelong learning, medical schools should encourage student participation in the education process through self-directed learning and provide opportunities for studying some areas in depth and for clinical experience in a range of settings. Setting standards for performance assessment is a relatively new area of study. Outcomes are one of the attracting words in education and outcome-based education is a powerful and tempting way of reforming medical education. Assessment plays a major role in the process of medical education, the lives of medical students and the certification of competent physicians. Assessment and evaluation often drive the curricula of medical schools for continuous development by setting curriculum mapping which is an aspect of curriculum development that has been relatively neglected and not implemented by majority of medical colleges. Concept mapping is reviewed as a potential measure of a student’s evolving knowledge framework. Academic and medical professionals are faced with the need to develop non-traditional teaching and assessment techniques which capture both the learning and performance of broad abilities. Setting standards for performance assessment is a relatively new area of study. Assessment tools selected should be valid, reliable, and practical and have an appropriate impact on student learning. The preferred assessment tool will vary with the outcome to be assessed. It is likely to be some form of written test, a performance test such as an Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE) in which the student’s competence can be tested in a simulated situation, and a test of the student’s behavior over time in clinical practice, based on tutors’ reports and students’ Portfolios. There should be collaboration across the continuum of education in test development as it relates to the assessment of learning outcomes and in the implementation of a competency-based approach assessment. Although the diagnosis and management of the sick is a central function of the medical profession, students must also acquire and be tested for appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes relating to disease prevention, health promotion and public health medicine. Students must also be made aware of alternative health practices used by the community including their cultural significance and their dangers.

The main objective of this paper is to familiarize the reader with the framework, principles, key concepts and practical considerations of standard setting approaches and to enable the reader to make “educated” choices in selecting the most appropriate standard setting approach for their testing needs. The authors believe that instead of solely determining whether students graduate based on the accumulation of course credits, graduation should be dependent upon demonstrating mastery of a defined set of competencies. The authors also believe that in response to increasing public demands for a greater measure of accountability for the physicians we educate, rapid progress needs to be made in medical education designing competency-based curricula and assessing students in increasingly realistic ways to show they can safely practice medicine.