Expanding the Scope of Residency Training in Primary Care: A Novel ‘Caring for the Underserved’ Program

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Background
Social factors and consequent disparities inform the value of healthcare delivery and receipt. 1,2 These factors include race, gender, socioeconomic status, education, and social support networks, and have been shown in a recent meta analysis to play a role in over a third of deaths each year in the United States. 3-5 At the same time, current medical student and resident education does little to train future physicians to identify and address social disparities. New physicians leave residency with little formal training to prepare them to meet the unique needs of these populations.

To address this gap in education, the Department of Medicine at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, in conjunction with the Good Neighbor Health Clinic (a local clinic providing free medical and dental care to low-income adults in the Upper Valley), and the Department of Pediatrics developed a supplemental curriculum to expand the scope of care to low-income adults in the Upper Valley), and the Department of Neighbor Health Clinic (a local clinic providing free medical and dental care track curriculum, with continued expansion of the online database and seminar topics.

Results
Residents reported increased knowledge levels and confidence in caring for underserved populations following completion of the sessions. They reported increased confidence:
• engaging patients and families in discussions regarding housing conditions
• discussing public benefits
• reviewing food security
• addressing domestic violence
• understanding social determinants of health, social health systems and public health insurance

Conclusions
Residents in both the Internal Medicine Primary Care Track and Pediatric Program at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center reported minimal prior training to identify and address social determinants of health, and pursued elective training sessions to address these gaps in residency education. After completion of an innovative, voluntary, multi-disciplinary, discussion-based series that involved primary care and pediatric residents and their partners, residents reported increased satisfaction in their level of training, and demonstrated improved knowledge of social determinants of health.

The multi-disciplinary approach of our program resonates with the need to design cooperative solutions to address social disparities in healthcare. While other programs have worked to improve resident training in social determinants of health in a variety of ways—for example, by integrating community health workers and civil legal services lawyers into their clinic experiences6,6 —this program’s approach was unique in several ways: it integrated primary care and pediatrics residents, involved providers from a variety of backgrounds, and included development of a resource library which will remain available to residents long-term.

Future Work
This program will become a permanent feature of the primary care track curriculum, with continued expansion of the online database and seminar topics.

References

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