

ARE THE NEW ENTRANT MEDICAL STUDENTS CAPABLE OF HANDLING THE PRELIMINARY STEP OF THE PROBLEM BASED LEARNING APPROACH?

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The suitability of introducing Problem Based Learning (PBL) as a method of instruction in the Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya is being considered. The preliminary step of the PBL approach is the identification of important information (key data points) in the patient presentation or the problem, by a small group of students. Justification is sought whether the new entrant students to Faculty, possess the requisite ability to handle the session on identifying important information in a given problem. Thus the objective of the present investigation was to determine the ability of the new entrant medical students to handle the preliminary step of the PBL process, *ie.* identification of data points and the likely sites of lesions in a given problem.

Test group consisted of 164, new entrant medical students (2002/2003 batch) of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Peradeniya. The students in groups of 8-10 were presented with a "paper case" developed by University of Adelaide, Australia during the Intensive English Course. Each group of students was instructed to complete the following tasks 1) read the patient presentation, 2) identify important data points of diagnostic relevance and 3) work out the likely site/s of lesion (very broadly) in the given patient. Each group was instructed to appoint a scribe who took down notes, presented the findings of the small group to the large group and handed over the notes to the teacher observers. The observers were the English teachers who were instructed to monitor student participation and involvement in their classes. The notes of the 18 scribes and the feedback of teachers were analyzed.

Results showed that at group level, the key data points identified by the students were consistent with those of the tutor guide of this problem. All English teachers reported that the student interaction during the activity was high. And endorsed the view that the "paper case" held learner interest.

This study provided evidence that the new entrant medical students to the faculty of Medicine Peradeniya are able to handle the preliminary step of the problem based learning approach, which calls for English reading and comprehension ability and deductive reasoning ability.