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Training tomorrow’s doctors, in exercise medicine, for tomorrow’s patients

Ann B Gates

Tomorrow’s doctors need to be trained to deliver safe and effective exercise advice, for tomorrow’s patients. These doctors will tackle the burden of preventable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory conditions. They will also prescribe exercise as an integral part of the prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, recovery and survivorship of many chronic diseases or non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

Educating future doctors aligns with the WHO ‘25 by 25’ goals to reduce physical inactivity by 10%, by 2025 and the Toronto Charter for NCD prevention: Investments that work for physical activity. The Toronto Charter demonstrates that doctors are important influencers of patient behaviour and key initiators of NCD prevention actions within healthcare systems, and can influence large proportions of the population, especially their patients. Tomorrow’s doctors, trained in exercise medicine, will be able to meet the burden of disease and ill health competently, confidently and capably: by being proactive on prevention and specific in their treatment with physical activity advice.

Unfortunately, undergraduate medical schools in the UK are not giving a high priority to exercise advice. Evidence shows there is widespread omission of basic teaching elements, such as the Chief Medical Officer recommendations and guidance on physical activity. Without a larger commitment from medical school deans, to provide this education, tomorrow’s doctors will not be equipped to provide physical activity advice and support with every patient consultation. The General Medical Council has a ‘Tomorrow’s Doctor’s training requirements guide. We mapped the international and national exercise medicine recommendations and guidance in NCD management, against the requirements for: ‘Tomorrow’s Doctors.’

Exercise as a medicine, or physical activity advice as health promotion, was included in at least 76 National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines and recommendations. Exercise prescription is financially prudent. Within the duties of a doctor, exercise medicine as a scientific and scholarly practice, could be mapped against five of a doctor’s six core duties.

With the justification to train tomorrow’s doctors in exercise medicine enshrined in these policies, an international group of exercise medicine experts developed a comprehensive package of teaching resources for medical schools to use in the undergraduate, exercise medicine curricula.

The resource is the Nottingham University Medical School, ‘off the shelf’ core exercise medicine and chronic disease module. This contains:

- A learning module, adapted from an existing and accredited continuous professional development (CPD) training resource.
- A 10 h, referenced, slide set series covering the key aspects of exercise medicine, chronic diseases and surgical care.
- The introductory slide sets have been adapted for use with permissions, from the existing Kings College Medical School undergraduate course developed by Dr John H M Brooks in association with Dr Ann Wylie and KUMEC (King’s Undergraduate Medical Education in the Community).
- The national and international recommendations (plus best practice advice) for physical activity for specific NCDs.

Resource overview

The content highlights some of the 76 NICE guidance and covers:
1. Introduction to physical activity and health
2. Physiological adaptations to exercise
3. Prescribing physical activity and exercise
4. Public health and exercise
5. Cancer and exercise
6. Heart disease, stroke and peripheral artery disease and exercise
7. Hypertension and exercise
8. Type 2 diabetes and exercise
9. Mental health, severe mental health and learning disabilities and exercise
10. Dementia and exercise

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Editorial

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