



Original article

The First Experience with an Interns' Retreat at the American University of Beirut-Medical Center

Nisrine Ghazal¹, Marie Noel Rahal², Pierre Bou Khalil^{3*}

¹Jumairah American Clinic, ²Case Western Reserve University Hospital, ³American University of Beirut-Medical Center.

ABSTRACT

Background: The objective of this report is to illustrate the importance of a one-day retreat in promoting interns' wellbeing, friendship, and developing early skills in leadership, time management, planning, teamwork and communication. **Material and methods:** The medical chief residents and program director planned the activity that took place at the American University of Beirut campus. Twenty-five interns participated in this activity. The retreat included ice-breaking games, four training sessions, listening to the experience of a previous intern, a non-medical jeopardy and basketball games. **Results:** 93% of survey responders acknowledged that this activity played an important role in strengthening peer-to-peer relationship and also recommended making this activity a yearly tradition. The session on communication got rated best. **Conclusion:** We recommend continuing with this activity as we believe it can help our interns better navigate through the most challenging year of their residency.

KEYWORDS: Communication, Interns, Medical education, Resident's wellbeing, Retreat

INTRODUCTION

Internship is universally known to be a demanding and stressful year in which one has to cope with new system and responsibilities while developing a multitude of skills and preparing the transition to residency. Throughout the years, programs have focused on decreasing burnout. However, the literature is emphasizing on changing the conversation from burnout to wellness through a culture shift and creating an environment that builds upon strengths [1]. It has also been shown that building a community is a key element to optimizing residents' wellness and learning environments and that a less cohesive environment leads to feelings of unappreciation and isolation[2].

Moreover, "the program must be committed to and be responsible for promoting patient safety and resident wellbeing and to providing a supportive educational environment." Inspired by this Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education International (ACGME-I) principle and by our conviction that residents' wellbeing is a key component to optimal patient care, we opted to start the interns' retreat activity in the internal medicine program at

the American University of Beirut- Medical Center (AUB-MC) in September 2014. Also, since our interns come from different universities, backgrounds, countries and cultures, the program director and chief residents felt the need to create an environment where each intern feels "at home".

The goals of this first experience were: 1) To form and strengthen friendship bonds between the new interns 2) To familiarize them with the department and its personnel and the hospital at large 3) To introduce them to concepts of leadership, time management, effective planning, team work and communication 4) To give them tips to better cope with the system and 5) To evaluate participants' experience and plan accordingly future activities.

In our report, we present structure and outcomes of this first experience in AUBMC and Lebanon as well as suggestions for future additions. We believe that this activity is the place to introduce our interns to skills needed during residency while promoting a friendly environment and a support system.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The activity was planned and organized by the medical chief residents and supervised by the internal medicine program director. The activity was reviewed by the quality advisory council of AUBMC and approved as a quality improvement initiative to improve the process of delivery of care, and therefore was exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.

General plan of the day

Twenty-five interns joined the retreat (our program has fourteen categorical interns and twenty-five preliminary interns), which took place at the American University of Beirut (AUB) campus on Sunday September 21st 2014.

The interns on call were freed from their duties in order to participate in this activity.

After breakfast, we started the day with outdoor ice-breaking games that focused on getting to know each other's names, nicknames and special traits of character.

The interns were then divided into four groups of six to seven. Each group was assigned to rotate in a specific order on four different training sessions (Thirty minutes each), the contents of which are elaborated below.

Following the sessions, the interns gathered to hear the experience of a previous intern along with some tips to survive internship and a small allusion to spirituality in medicine.

The medical chief residents organized afterwards a non-medical jeopardy during lunch, which aims were to be familiar with the senior house-staff, the faculty, the hospital facilities, and the internal medicine department history and current personnel.

The retreat ended with basketball games.

Trainers had a background formation in the topics they presented. Two are leaders in the Lebanese Medical Students' International Committee (LeMSIC), a branch of the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA), one is a SCOUT leader, and one is specialized in theater games.

Communication Session

This session started by a ten-minute warm-up exercise which aim was to recognize mental and physical tension. Techniques used are from the work of Feldenkrais, Alexander, Yoga and Fitzmaurice. This was followed by a group game in which the interns generated material drawing on uncomfortable challenging situations with patients, colleagues or co-workers... After that, they engaged in a "through-line" activity with tennis balls in which they are asked to deliver a message with clarity, brevity, and thoughtfulness. The session ended with warm-down in which the participants grounded themselves for the next activity.

Leadership Session

The session was divided into several exercises, one which aim was to identify leadership skills in one another from the interactions they had in the first 4 months of the academic year. Another exercise aimed at identifying "fighting"

expressions as well as alternatives that relay the same messages. A third exercise aimed at playing the roles of different types of leaders: i.e. the by the-book, the self-absorbed, the paternalistic, the blamer, the lecturer, the know-it-all... A final exercise constituted in identifying a role model leader for each intern and elucidating the admired traits.

Planning And Team Work Session

The planning session's aims were to recognize the elements of a successful plan and the dynamics of a team. It was explained that the elements of a plan are summarized by: need, aim, objective (achievable, specific, measurable, relevant and time-bounded), method, implementation and evaluation. Interns also learned the SWOT analysis: identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The second part of the session focused on being efficient team players and knowing how to deal with the different characters (bulldog, horse, monkey, frog, gazelle, hedgehog, hippopotamus, giraffe and fox) in order to achieve ones' plans.

Time management And New Technologies Session

The session started by teaching the interns how to make their to-do lists and the pitfalls commonly encountered. They were then introduced to the Eisenhower method to determine important versus urgent tasks. The four Ds (do, delay, delegate and delete) method was also explained. Interns were then given tips about e-mail etiquette and email categorization. They were also given methods to select important research articles and introduced to the most useful smart phone applications for young doctors.

RESULTS

Following this activity, we circulated an anonymous survey by email to all participating interns. The survey was circulated nine months following the activity to capture the lasting impressions. 14 responses were collected: 13 responders (93%) rated the activity as fun, and 2 responders labeled it as fun and interesting (Table 1). The communication session that included yoga exercises got rated best with 9 interns thinking it was very good (64%), followed by the experience of an intern session (6 thought it was very good: 43%)(Table 2). The sessions on planning and teamwork, time management and new technologies and leadership were described mostly as good (50%)(Table 2).

13 out of 14 interns (93%) acknowledged that this activity played an important role in strengthening peer-to-peer relationship and 93% also recommended making this activity a yearly tradition (Table 3). When asked about the overall rate of the retreat, 57% thought it is a very good activity and 43% labeled it as good (Table 2). Finally, the suggestions made were mainly about changing the location (outside the campus), going to outdoor rural areas, increasing the amounts of sports activities. Some recommended a hiking activity. One comment suggested having more non-medical speakers and another comment proposed having a similar activity at the end of the academic year.

Table 1: Subjective Overall Evaluation of the interns' retreat

	Overall Evaluation
Time Wasting	0(0%)
Boring	0(0%)
Fun	13 (93%)
Interesting	3 (21%)

Data is presented as number (percentage)

Table 2: Results of Individual sessions' evaluations and objective overall evaluation

	Planning and Team Work	Leadership	Time Management and New Technologies	Communication	The Experience of an Intern	Overall Rate
Unsatisfactory	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Below Average	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Average	2 (14%)	1 (7%)	2 (14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Good	7 (50%)	7 (50%)	7 (50%)	5 (36%)	8 (57%)	6 (43%)
Very Good	5 (36%)	6 (43%)	5 (36%)	9 (64%)	6 (43%)	8 (57%)

Data is presented as number (percentage)

Table 3: Effect on peer-to-peer relationship and activity reiteration

	Did the activity strengthen peer-to-peer- relationship?	Do you recommend making the activity a yearly tradition?
Yes	13 (93%)	13 (93%)
No	1 (7%)	0 (0%)
Maybe	0 (0%)	1 (7%)

Data is presented as number (percentage)

DISCUSSION

The interns' retreat activity was done for the first time at AUB-MC in September 2014. It comprised didactic sessions, interactive indoor and outdoor games, yoga exercises, non-medical jeopardy and basketball games. The overall feedback was positive. The retreat helped forming or strengthening friendships between the house-staff, and there was almost unanimity towards having this activity a traditional one.

The University of Washington started this kind of activity for the pediatrics department in 1977 [3]. The chief benefit of the retreat back then was the coming together of the intern group and the subsequent support they were able to give to each other [3]. Moreover, the educational content was deemed less important than the fact that the retreat occurred [3].

Twenty years later, Klein et al described their cumulative experience in the pediatrics department of University of Washington and Children's hospital and Regional Medical Center (5 days activity from mid-September to mid-October) [4]. The continuation of this activity testifies about its success, mainly in building personal and professional support through shared experiences every year [4].

Interestingly, Pillarisetti et al in their experience in the interns' retreat concluded that humor in this activity lead to a trend towards improvement in depression scores [5].

The majority of their interns therefore recommended that humorous retreats be used in the coming years [5].

In Cleveland Clinic, the one-day retreat for internal medicine interns was beneficial in helping to develop teamwork and leadership skills [6]. The highest rated section was the experiential learning that highlighted the advantages of teamwork [6].

Another different experience comes from the cross-disciplinary annual retreat at Penn State College of Medicine, Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, organized by the Department of Humanities. They aimed during this activity to help the residents reflect on the nature of professionalism and on what it means to be a role model, contemplate the values and priorities that brought them into medicine, their role as leaders and finally re-examine the values and habits they model, their own leadership style and teaching skills. This retreat got excellent feedback from the participants [7].

Wipf et al on the other hand had a very positive experience by introducing a practical course to new senior residents, which included problem-solving and teaching; skills much needed as a preparation for the transition into ward-team leaders [8].

Inspired by the different rich experiences cited above and by our recent experience, we suggest the following

additions/modifications for future activities. First, given the positive feedback, we recommend implementing this activity as a yearly tradition. We would modify the set-up: outside the hospital or campus, include more sports activities and involve speakers with different interests and specialties.

We would minimize didactic sessions and favor interactive and entertaining exercises. A session on developing teaching skills would be beneficial as well as the introduction of discussions on ethical dilemmas and challenging situations. We would give more room for interns to express their fears, challenges and difficulties. Inviting the seniors to a couple of sessions might help create a longitudinal much-needed support system.

CONCLUSION

Our first experience with the interns' retreat was positive overall, mainly through forming a support system and friendship bonds. It was also highly rated and recommendations were made to make it a yearly tradition. If reiterated, we believe that this initiative can help our interns better navigate through the most challenging year of their residency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank Drs Antoine Saliba, Bouchra Tawk, Firas Kreidieh, Milia Ayash and Wajiha JurdiKheir for preparing the retreat's sessions. They also thank Drs. Fuad Ziyadeh, the internal medicine department's chairman, Dr. Kamal Badr, the associate dean for medical education and Ms. Diana Saade, the program coordinator for their help and support.

Competing interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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*Corresponding author: Pierre Bou Khalil
E-Mail:pb05@aub.edu.lb