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INTEGRATING SOFT SKILLS EDUCATION INTO UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL CURRICULA: A NEED FOR FUTURE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

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[1] Soft skills are non-technical personal attributes that enable individuals to interact effectively with others in professional settings. These skills include communication, teamwork, leadership, adaptability, emotional intelligence and problem-solving; all of which contribute significantly to workplace performance. Unlike hard skills which are measurable and acquired through formal education and technical training, soft skills facilitate effective interpersonal relationships and collaborative practice.[2] Historically, Sir William Osler emphasized that effective medical practice requires not only scientific expertise but also compassion, empathy and effective communication. His philosophy laid the foundation for patient-centered care, highlighting the importance of interpersonal skills alongside clinical competence. He believed that healthcare providers must go beyond the clinical skills and learn to connect with the patient on an emotional level.
[3] This concept is reflected in Theodore Roosevelt's well-known statement that states; "Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care," underscoring the importance of empathy in healthcare delivery. Teaching theoretical knowledge and its practical application have always been the focal point of the academics of a health care professional which is crucial and forms the basis of medical knowledge upon which the clinical competence in patient care is built. However, developing soft skills during undergraduate medical education is equally important. Early exposure prepares future healthcare professionals to communicate effectively, work collaboratively and provide compassionate patient-centered care in the future. [6] Studies have shown that healthcare professionals with higher levels of empathy communicate more effectively with patients, achieve greater patient satisfaction, improve diagnostic accuracy and reduce the likelihood of medical errors. Soft skills enable healthcare professionals to respond effectively to the complex demands of modern clinical practice. These competencies also facilitate lifelong learning, evidence-based practice and adaptability within rapidly evolving healthcare systems. Furthermore, soft skills training in healthcare education improve future professionals' capacity to utilize current scientific evidence and adapt to changing healthcare landscapes. [4] Recent evidence suggests that medical complaints are increasingly related to ineffective communication and lack of empathy, rather than technical incompetence alone. Therefore patients are more likely to complain about communication failure, emotional detachment and the sense that doctors avoid genuine emotional connection.
Incorporating soft skills training and education as a part of curriculum among undergraduate students requires robust and pro-active measures at the level of medical administration and other authoritative bodies of the institution. Medical institutions should introduce structured orientation programs that emphasize the importance of soft skills from the beginning of undergraduate training. Early exposure can help students appreciate the relevance of communication, empathy,

professionalism, and teamwork throughout their medical education. These sessions may be conducted biannually; with each workshop focusing on a specific soft skill relevant to clinical practice. [5] The accreditation council for graduate medical education in the United States recognizes communication skills as an essential competency in graduate medical education. Secondly, we can introduce simulation-based training workshops which will enable students to interact with simulation-based patients which will further help them to apply these skills evident by the Program to Enhance Relational and Communication Skills (PERCS), which is an established educational model that was developed at Boston Children's Hospital-Harvard Medical School communication and relational skills to postgraduate clinicians. The course emphasizes experiential learning through simulations and debriefing of case scenarios. In addition to it student centered learning methods ,particularly problem-based learning (PBL) can also be developed which would significantly improve soft skills in medical students.

Blending soft skill education with academic curriculum is the need of the hour. Therefore, Medical Councils and Medical and Dental institutions in Pakistan should collaborate and devise a curriculum in which soft skills education must be mandatory for all undergraduate healthcare professionals that will help to create a promising and compassionate environment for the leading healthcare professional which will certainly raise the standards of medical education in Pakistan.

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