

# Attitudes and Opinions of Medical Students Concerning HIV and AIDS in Malaysia: the Next Steps

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Dear Editor,

Verma et al., have certainly conducted a fascinating study into the levels of awareness, attitudes and opinions of medical students concerning HIV and AIDS in Malaysia [1]. There are good reasons to be positive about some of the outcomes of the study and yet clearly there are also areas where there is room for improvement. The authors are correct to think in terms of a curriculum approach in an attempt to solve the problem. There are knowledge deficits to be addressed, but also quite clearly attitudinal problems. Of the two categories it may be that the attitudinal problems are the most difficult to tackle. Providing targeted knowledge resources to meet the knowledge deficits will likely make a significant impact on these deficits. And yet how should one tackle the attitudinal problems?

Medical students' attitudes do not arise in isolation; rather they reflect wider societal attitudes that are held within the society that the medical students come from. They also arise from the community of practice in which medical students are immersed in from when they start medical school. In this environment it is the senior doctors that set the tone and portray attitudes that are acceptable within the relevant clinical environment. And the clinical environment is

ultimately the learning environment. If senior health care staff portray attitudes that are in any way discriminatory against patients with HIV infection, then these attitudes will be mimicked by the medical students. By contrast if the senior doctors express attitudes that are healthy and positive, then these attitudes will likely be taken up by the students and will probably stay with them throughout their medical careers. Senior doctors are role models within medical education and their modelling of attitudinal perceptions can have a profound and long lasting effect on students who form part of their team. This role modelling will likely have a much more powerful effect than anything that could be transmitted to the medical students by means of lectures or reading materials. And if role models are of great importance, then the first intervention to change attitudes must be to train the trainers.

Yours Sincerely,

## REFERENCES

- [1] Verma RK, Wong S, Chakravarthi S, Barua A. An Assessment of the Level of Awareness, Attitudes, and Opinions of the Medical Students Concerning HIV and AIDS in Malaysia. *J Clin Diagn Res.* 2014; 8(4):HC10-13.

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