Towards Inclusive Excellence: Advancing Diversity and Equity in Medical Education

Ritcha Saxena[1*] Ishrat Nur Ridi[2] Kevin Carnewale[3]

[1]Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Minnesota Medical College, Duluth, Minnesota, USA

[2]Department of Medical Oncology, National Institute of Cancer Research & Hospital, Dhaka, Bangladesh

[3]Department of Pathology, Des Moines College of Osteopathic Medicine, Des Moines University, Iowa, USA

*Corresponding Author: Ritcha Saxena

[1]Department of Biomedical Sciences, University of Minnesota Medical College, 1035 University Dr, Duluth, MN 55812, USA. Email: ritcha.saxena@yahoo.in

Abstract

This study underscores the paramount importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in shaping the future generation of healthcare professionals. By prioritizing DEI, healthcare institutions can address health disparities, enhance cultural competence, and promote a more equitable healthcare environment. Strategies encompass the integration of diverse faculty, the infusion of DEI content throughout the curriculum, faculty diversity initiatives, and specialized training to deliver culturally competent care. The benefits extend to patient-centred healthcare, advocacy for health justice, policy reform, and groundbreaking medical research. By embedding DEI principles into medical education, institutions exemplify their commitment to social responsibility, preparing the next cohort of healthcare professionals to dismantle barriers, eradicate inequities, and forge an inclusive healthcare system accessible to all patients.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Medical Education, Healthcare, Cultural Competence, Health Disparities

Introduction

The purpose of medical education is to shape the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of future healthcare professionals. Today, the landscape of medical education is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the urgent recognition that healthcare professionals of the future must be equipped with more than just clinical expertise [1,2]. They must also possess a deep understanding of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles. Recognizing the broad patient populations they will serve; medical schools are increasingly adopting DEI principles to prepare graduates to deliver high-quality treatment to people from diverse backgrounds, in today's multicultural society. This review seeks to evaluate the incorporation of DEI into medical education, highlighting its profound significance and far-reaching ramifications. As the overwhelming impact of socioeconomic factors on health outcomes becomes more evident, the role of medical education in shaping the future of healthcare has never been more pivotal. DEI is no longer optional, but a necessity; and it must be promoted in medical education given the changing nature of healthcare and the rising diversity of the patient population [3,4]. The essence of DEI lies in cultivating care that is both comprehensive and patient-centred, a mandate that modern

healthcare cannot afford to overlook. The growing quantity of data linking diverse healthcare teams to improved patient outcomes demonstrates the prioritisation of DEI in medical education [5]. To deliver effective and culturally sensitive treatment, healthcare providers must be adept at understanding the unique experiences and beliefs of each patient [6]. DEI, therefore, ceases to be a mere educational addendum and becomes an integral component of preparing students for the realities of today's healthcare system. This review highlights the significance of DEI in medical education and explores its transformative potential, both for future physicians and the diverse tapestry of patients they will serve. It also delves into practical strategies, such as adapting application processes and infusing curricula with culturally relevant content, to foster DEI within the medical field.

Diversity: An Integral Aspect of Humanity

Diversity is a complex and intrinsic aspect of human society, encompassing various characteristics like race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, ability, language, religion, and nationality. These dimensions collectively form the rich symphony of our experiences, traditions, and worldviews that different racial and ethnic groups contribute to our interconnected global society. Within diversity, the realms of gender and sexual orientation are dynamic, challenging traditional binary constructs. They emphasise the significance of acknowledging and respecting each individual's self-identified gender. Understanding these dimensions is pivotal for fostering acceptance, inclusion, and equality for all members of our society [7]. Age diversity encapsulates the diverse life stages that individuals traverse, each marked by unique experiences, challenges, and perspectives. Embracing age diversity nurtures intergenerational understanding, enabling societies to benefit from the wisdom of older generations while remaining attuned to the evolving perspectives of the youth. Socioeconomic diversity reflects disparities in income, education, and occupation. On the other hand, disability diversity highlights the value of individuals with diverse physical, cognitive, sensory, and psychological abilities. It necessitates the creation of accessible and inclusive environments, products, and services to ensure equal opportunities for everyone. Language and cultural diversity celebrate the myriad linguistic and cultural nuances that adorn our world. Religious diversity promotes interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding, fostering harmony among different belief systems. Nationality and geographical diversity acknowledge the vast array of origins and geographic locations from which individuals hail, contributing to the intricate mosaic of global interconnectedness [8,9].

In the realm of medical education, diversity is not just a theoretical concept; it is an indispensable practical imperative. Healthcare professionals engage with a diverse spectrum of patient populations, each with unique health needs, cultural beliefs, and life experiences. Therefore, understanding and valuing diversity within medical education are paramount. They are vital for providing effective, patient-centred care, respecting individual preferences, and mitigating health disparities. Diverse healthcare teams, comprising professionals from various backgrounds, bring together a wealth of perspectives and problem-solving approaches. This diversity fuels innovation and creativity when addressing complex medical challenges. It leads to enhanced patient outcomes and drives advancements in medical research and practices [10,11]. Thus, the journey towards embracing and championing diversity in all its dimensions is an unceasing commitment that benefits not only individuals but also society as a whole.

Equity in Society and Education

Equity stands as a fundamental principle in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion in medical education. It serves as a compass guiding efforts to rectify historical and systemic injustices, with the ultimate goal of fostering a society where every individual can fully realize their potential, unburdened by the limitations imposed by their background or circumstances. Unlike the concept of equality, which treats all individuals in the same manner, equity recognizes that fairness necessitates addressing the diverse needs and challenges faced by different groups. It acknowledges the historical disadvantages that certain individuals have endured due to systemic biases, discrimination, and the unequal distribution of resources [12,13].

At its core, equity seeks to dismantle the structural barriers that perpetuate inequality. It acknowledges that historical disadvantages can lead to present disparities, and therefore, equitable measures involve the redistribution of resources, opportunities, and support to those who have been systematically marginalized. By addressing these root causes, equity transcends the mere alleviation of symptoms of inequality and strives to eradicate the underlying factors that perpetuate these disparities. Implementing equity requires a deep understanding of the diverse circumstances and contexts from which individuals come. It demands the identification and rectification of biases within systems, institutions, and policies that perpetuate inequities.

Equity-minded approaches prioritize proactive measures that consider the unique needs of different groups, ensuring adequate support to achieve equitable outcomes. In the context of education, an equitable approach may involve providing resources to disadvantaged communities, thereby levelling the playing field and bridging the opportunity gap for all students. Equity and social justice are intertwined, with the latter aspiring to construct a more fair and egalitarian society in which all individuals have the opportunity to flourish. Achieving equity necessitates a profound comprehension of historical disparities and a steadfast commitment to meaningful actions, such as policy changes, affirmative action, targeted interventions, and programs aimed at ensuring equal access to education, healthcare, and employment [14, 15].

It is important to note that equity is not about lowering standards or providing unearned advantages. Rather, it recognizes that individuals begin their journey from different points due to systemic inequalities and strives to ensure that everyone has the necessary resources and support to reach the same finish line. True fairness requires active efforts to correct the imbalances perpetuated over time.

The Power of Inclusion

Inclusion forms the bedrock of vibrant and harmonious societies, where every individual isn't just welcomed but genuinely valued, respected, and empowered to participate fully. It surpasses mere representation, aiming to create a culture of belonging where diverse voices, perspectives, and identities are not only accepted but celebrated. Inclusive environments intentionally break down physical, cultural, or attitudinal barriers that could otherwise marginalize or exclude certain groups. At its essence, inclusion nurtures a sense of community that transcends differences, challenging biases and assumptions that might unwittingly create divisions. Inclusive spaces promote open dialogue, active listening, and empathy, enabling people to learn from each other's experiences and broaden their horizons. By fostering a culture of curiosity and understanding, inclusion enriches individual lives and strengthens the bonds that unite communities. Such spaces recognize that diversity is more than meeting

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quotas; it's about creating an ecosystem where everyone's contributions are indispensable for collective growth and success [16, 17].

Establishing inclusive environments requires continuous effort and unwavering commitment. It involves reevaluating norms and practices that might unintentionally perpetuate exclusion. Inclusive leaders actively seek diverse perspectives, amplify marginalized voices, and create pathways for underrepresented individuals to contribute and lead. They nurture psychological safety, ensuring that individuals feel comfortable expressing themselves without fear of criticism or reprisal.

In educational settings, inclusion is paramount. When students from diverse backgrounds feel valued and included, their engagement and learning outcomes soar. Inclusive classrooms reflect students' experiences, demonstrating acknowledgment and respect for their unique journeys. Beyond academics, inclusive education equips students to navigate and positively contribute to a globalized society, preparing them for the diverse world they'll encounter beyond the classroom. Achieving inclusion is an ongoing journey marked by self-reflection, learning, addressing biases, embracing humility, and challenging preconceived notions. It requires a steadfast commitment to being open to others' experiences and viewpoints [18].

Significance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in medical education

The significance of DEI in medical education extends far beyond these words being merely buzzwords; they serve as the foundational pillars of a resilient and responsive healthcare system within the complexities of modern healthcare. As healthcare systems evolve to meet the challenges of a diverse patient population, incorporating DEI ideas into medical education becomes increasingly crucial.

One key aspect of DEI's relevance lies in promoting cultural competency among future healthcare professionals. By embracing diversity in education, students are better prepared to understand and respect patients from various cultural backgrounds. This leads to improved patient outcomes and satisfaction, as trust and rapport are fostered between healthcare practitioners and patients. Moreover, DEI in medical education plays a vital role in addressing health disparities rooted in social factors. By equipping future healthcare practitioners with DEI education, they can become effective advocates for equitable treatment, having gained insights into the experiences of disadvantaged groups. This kind of education has the potential to significantly reduce healthcare inequalities through community outreach and policy advocacy [19,20].

Representation and inclusion are catalysts for DEI. It is not solely limited to the students' experiences but also extends to the composition of classroom teachers. When students from underrepresented groups see themselves reflected in the classroom, they are more likely to succeed. Additionally, having instructors from diverse backgrounds contributes to a well-rounded education and creates a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere for students. Such visibility fosters an inclusive mindset that permeates the entire healthcare system [21].

Medical training must prepare students for a complex patient environment where identities become more intricate. A DEI-focused education enables students to embrace ambiguity and deliver person-centered care that considers patients' unique experiences and perspectives. DEI education is crucial in

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developing compassionate and efficient healthcare professionals who can comprehend the cultural implications of a diagnosis and adapt care to meet the socioeconomic status of each patient. At its core, integrating DEI into medical training aligns with the moral foundations of healthcare. Respecting the dignity of all patients is a fundamental principle, and inclusive medical education actively supports this principle. Medical institutions that adopt a DEI strategy demonstrate social responsibility and lay the groundwork for a healthcare system that treats all individuals fairly and equitably.

Strategies for Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Medical Education

Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in medical education requires concrete strategies and a comprehensive approach that goes beyond rhetoric. It demands intentional efforts to transform teaching methods, admissions policies, and organizational cultures to better accommodate the diverse range of individuals who will be treated within these institutions [22].

One effective strategy is to adopt integrative methods of acceptance in the admissions process. Focusing solely on academic performance limits the potential of applicants. By implementing a more holistic admissions policy that considers factors beyond academic achievements, such as life experiences and personal qualities, medical schools can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for students from all backgrounds [23].

Another crucial aspect is making changes to the curriculum to foster cultural competency among future healthcare workers. This involves integrating DEI topics throughout the curriculum, including case studies that represent diverse patient experiences and discussions on health inequities and socioeconomic factors. By embracing these curricular innovations, students develop a more nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in patient care [24, 25].

The composition of faculty also plays a significant role in promoting DEI in medical education. Students from underrepresented groups benefit from having faculty members who reflect their own backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, providing professional development opportunities for teachers that focus on inclusive pedagogy enhances the educational environment. By prioritizing cultural competence in faculty training, future healthcare practitioners will be better prepared to meet the diverse needs of their patients [26-28].

Creating specialized support services for traditionally underserved students is another effective strategy. These support services, including mentorship programs, affinity groups, and seminars addressing specific challenges faced by students from certain backgrounds, help students feel more supported and enhance their overall educational experience. By providing the necessary tools for academic and emotional success, medical schools can ensure that all students thrive [29].

Furthermore, educational institutions should strive to create learning spaces that welcome diverse viewpoints and foster a culture of acceptance. This can be achieved by encouraging open discussions on DEI issues, providing safe venues for discourse, and celebrating cultural events. By actively promoting an inclusive environment, medical schools can cultivate a culture that values diversity and inclusion [30].

Lastly, forming alliances with community groups, advocacy organizations, and healthcare practitioners focused on underserved populations can provide valuable hands-on experience for students. These partnerships bridge classroom learning with clinical practice, helping medical students develop compassion and awareness while gaining exposure to the healthcare needs of marginalized communities [31].

By implementing these strategies, medical education can become a catalyst for positive change, equipping future healthcare professionals with the skills and mindset necessary to address health disparities and provide equitable care to all patients.

Literature Review - A Glimpse into the Healthcare Equity Landscape

In a study conducted by Maldonado et al. (2014) titled "The Role That Graduate Medical Education Must Play in Ensuring Health Equity and Eliminating Health Care Disparities," the moral and economic implications of healthcare inequalities, as highlighted by the 2002 Institute of Medicine report, are emphasized. To bridge these disparities, the study suggests several essential steps. These include the collection and publication of patient data, the promotion of language interpretation services, raising awareness, advocating for cultural competence training for healthcare personnel, and increasing provider diversity. Graduate medical education is seen as a pivotal player in eliminating healthcare inequities by evaluating trainees' ability to deliver patient-centered and culturally competent care. The study also emphasizes the need for residency and fellowship programs to prioritize cultural competence and for graduate medical education to actively support faculty diversity while disclosing institutional efforts to ensure a diverse physician workforce [32].

In their research titled "Infusing Diversity and Equity into Clinical Teaching: Training the Trainers," Wilson-Mitchell & Handa (2016) address the imperative for clinical teachers in healthcare disciplines to engage students in experiential learning that nurtures cultural awareness and respect. The study describes the organization of three diversity seminars aimed at preceptors and field instructors, designed to tackle concerns regarding the impact of ethnocidal, socioeconomic, and privileged disparities on academic learning experiences. These seminars covered a range of discrimination-related topics, including principles of social and health equality, as well as ethical challenges within clinical teaching settings. The study's outcomes have the potential to encourage the integration of equity principles into clinical education across various healthcare fields, including midwifery [33].

Gill et al. (2018) delved into the topic of "Effective Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Practices." Their study talks about the challenges faced by Canada's diverse population in patient encounters and employment conditions due to factors such as color, race, religion, immigration status, gender, sexual orientation, disability, income, literacy, and socioeconomic status. However, the study also highlights the potential for positive change through the emphasis on "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" (DEI) strategies. These strategies aim to cultivate inclusive team cultures and enhance the experiences of healthcare providers. The research places significant importance on DEI tactics not only for improving patient outcomes but also for enhancing organizational performance [34].

In a study by Cooke et al. (2019) titled "The Importance of a Diverse Specialty: Introducing the STS Field on Diversity and Inclusion," it was found that women and underrepresented minorities are

underrepresented in the cardiothoracic surgery workforce in the United States. To address this issue and promote cultural competency, the Societies of Thoracic Surgeons (STS) established the Workforce on Diversity and Inclusion. The study explores the background of the Workforce, its impact, the current state of diversity in surgery, STS members' perspectives on the value of a diverse specialty, and the ongoing and future efforts of the Workforce on Diversity and Inclusion [35].

Similarly, McCleary-Gaddy (2019) conducted a study titled "Defining the Difference between the Office of Diversity & Inclusion and the Office of Diversity & Equity," highlighting the underrepresentation of women and underrepresented minorities in cardiothoracic surgery in the United States. The STS established the Workforce on Diversity and Inclusion to address this issue and improve cultural competency. The study examines the history of the Workforce, its impact, the current state of diversity in surgery, STS members' perceptions of the value of a diverse specialty, and the current and upcoming initiatives of the Workforce on Diversity and Inclusion [36].

Byyny et al. (2020) conducted a study titled "Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society: A Commitment to Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Service in Medicine," which focuses on the mission of the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society (AA) to promote diversity and inclusion in the medical field. AA aims to address the underrepresentation of minorities by fostering an inclusive, fair, and equitable environment that supports teaching, learning, patient care, and teamwork. The study emphasizes the importance of neutral, open, tolerant, inclusive, and culturally sensitive medical practitioners in achieving progress towards diversity [37].

In the study by Mmeje et al. (2020) titled "A Bottom-Up Departmental Approach to Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion for the Future," the academic department aimed to create an inclusive environment by involving faculty and staff in activities promoting diversity, equality, and inclusion. Through town hall meetings, focus group discussions, questionnaires, and community development initiatives over four years, the department demonstrated its commitment to inclusiveness. However, the study highlights the need for further development in communication and openness. The results suggest that other university obstetrics and gyanecology departments should also enhance the health and well-being of their patients in response to these findings [38].

Furthermore, Olzmann (2020) conducted a study titled "Galvanizing for the Future: A Bottom-Up Departmental Approach to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion," emphasizing the importance of diversity, equality, and inclusion for genuine transformation. Despite initiatives aimed at increasing diversity, certain marginalized groups in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine continue to be underrepresented due to structural imbalances. The study highlights the need to reassess recruitment techniques and redesign campus and work spaces to establish an inclusive and equitable culture. It emphasizes the incorporation of diversity, equality, and inclusion as fundamental values within institutions to achieve this objective [39].

In a study conducted by Rouan et al. (2021) titled "Publication bias is the consequence of a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion," the researchers explore how publication bias affects the landscape of medical and surgical research. They point out that publication bias can be rooted in discrimination based on factors such as race, ethnicity, age, religion, sex, gender, or sexual orientation. Despite progress in various areas, prejudice persists and can result in research that excludes specific demographics,

rendering its applicability limited. To combat this issue, the study recommends increasing diversity, equality, and inclusion in publishing processes. It also suggests requiring diversity, equity, and inclusion declarations in research reports and offering education and standards as necessary measures to address this problem. These steps are crucial for minimizing publishing bias, reducing harm to certain communities, and promoting more effective and universally applicable research [40].

In another study titled "Published Support for Wellness, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Among Internal Medicine Residency Program Websites," conducted by Storm et al. (2022), the focus is on evaluating the websites of U.S. residency programs in terms of their support for health, diversity, equality, and inclusion principles. The research found that out of 579 assessed programs, 419 had dedicated website sections for health-related activities, while 19 percent did not have such pages. Notably, 77% and 79% of the websites demonstrated support for gender diversity. However, a significant percentage, 51% and 68%, showed underrepresentation in medicine. About 30 percent of the programs included a diversity, equality, and inclusion section on their websites, with 16 percent having an assigned faculty or resident for these matters. Furthermore, chairpersons or program directors highlighted these topics on as many as 79% of the websites. This research exhibits the varying levels of commitment to wellness, diversity, equity, and inclusion principles among internal medicine residency programs and highlights the need for further attention to these critical aspects within the field [41].

In the study conducted by Yoder et al. (2022) titled "PEARLS (Perspectives on Equity Advancement: Research and Learning Symposium), a Case Report in Promoting DEI in a Medical School Setting," students and teachers took the lead in the PEARLS project, a year-long initiative aimed at promoting fairness in research and education. The symposiums included sessions such as "15 Percent Better," "Change Agents," and "Grand Rounds Pitches." According to research conducted in 2022, 100 percent of the respondents reported being encouraged to actively engage in DEI efforts after witnessing faculty work, committing to at least one action, and gaining a better understanding of student-led initiatives. PEARLS encourages higher education institutions to involve their communities in DEI strategies, fostering a sense of belonging, inspiration, and commitment to action [42].

Enhancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Medical Education

The emphasis on embracing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in medical education has profound implications for patient treatment, research, activism, and the establishment of a fair and inclusive society. Integrating DEI principles into medical education has far-reaching benefits.

Firstly, promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in medical school curricula enhances patient treatment and outcomes. Trust in healthcare providers and effective communication across cultural boundaries are essential for positive healthcare results. Medical students exposed to DEI concepts are better equipped to understand and meet the diverse needs of their patients. This understanding fosters clear communication, ensures patient satisfaction, and ultimately leads to improved treatment for all [43]. Secondly, a diverse range of perspectives drives medical innovation. By including different viewpoints, including those of patients themselves, researchers can enhance their work. Graduates who possess a strong grasp of DEI contribute to studies that uncover previously unnoticed healthcare inequities and offer innovative approaches to complex medical challenges [44].

Furthermore, DEI-rooted medical education cultivates advocates for health equity. Graduates are prepared to advocate for legislative reforms that address systemic injustices contributing to health disparities. Their voices strengthen the call for universal healthcare, equitable resource distribution, and social justice. Medical schools also have a responsibility to produce graduates who can effectively serve their communities. DEI-trained graduates are better equipped to act as community leaders, fostering collaboration among diverse community members and working towards eliminating health inequalities [45].

In today's globally interconnected, multicultural, and technologically advanced society, healthcare providers must be prepared to meet the needs of diverse patient populations. Improved DEI programs provide graduates with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of delivering care to patients from various cultural backgrounds. Ultimately, DEI training promotes a more compassionate healthcare workforce. Graduates approach healthcare services with empathy and an appreciation for patients' lived experiences and challenges, thereby reinforcing the humanistic nature of medicine [46].

To sum, incorporating DEI principles into medical education has wide-ranging effects. It improves patient treatment and outcomes, drives medical innovation, fosters health equity advocacy, cultivates community leadership, addresses global healthcare challenges, and promotes a more compassionate healthcare workforce. Embracing DEI in medical education is vital for creating a more inclusive and equitable healthcare system and society as a whole.

Key Takeaway

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in medical education are not aspirational but an ethical necessity. Embracing DEI principles allows institutions to create an inclusive environment, empowering students academically and personally. Beyond the classroom, DEI graduates become advocates and researchers, championing health equity. DEI fosters ethical healthcare, driven by empathy. It builds faculty diversity, elevates the profession, and advances justice. DEI isn't an addendum but integral in modern medical education, guiding future healthcare towards inclusivity, empathy, and ethical practice.

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