**The Impact of Learning Culture on Student USMLE Step 1 Preparation: A Qualitative study**

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Research Question

How do students perceive the learning environment, mental well-being, and administrative/faculty support before and after USMLE Step 1?

Background and Relevance of Study

Previous research has demonstrated the relationship between learning environment, mental well-being and student cohesiveness on exam performance by measuring these relationships quantitatively.1–4 While these studies highlight these relationships exist, they do not describe the mechanisms through which they impact students. In contrast, our study aims to explore how the learning environment, well-being, and student cohesiveness impact exam performance using qualitative interviewing methods.

Design and Methods

Using the University of Illinois College of Medicine as the research site, we conducted seven 20-30 minute interviews with five total participants both before and after taking the exam. Interviews were coded by the research team using both a priori and emergent codes. Framework analysis was used to identify common themes among interviews.5

Results

Three main themes were identified from these interviews: social isolation as a form of protection from anxiety, common coping strategies to promote mental well-being, and importance of faculty attitudes. Several students described removing themselves from their existing social circles or studying apart from other students to avoid comparison. Consistent with prior literature, students commonly utilized exercise and time for loved ones and hobbies, as coping strategies. Finally, students noted some faculty communicated encouraging messages and realistic expectations, easing anxiety, while others de-emphasized exam importance, leaving some with a false sense of security.

Conclusions

Anxiety is a commonly identified theme among students preparing to take the exam. We discovered that when some students look for mechanisms to cope with anxiety, they may socially isolate themselves to counter the fear of failing to meet expectations. Furthermore, messaging from faculty and advisors can alter the way students process their results after the exam and influence who students look to for support. Advisors may target these areas to improve the exam experience.

References

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