



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Empathy in medical education: an opportunity after the COVID-19 crisis

La empatía en la educación médica: una oportunidad después de la crisis por COVID-19

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Dear Editor:

It has been very interesting to read the article "Empathy and components of empathy in obstetric students" by the authors Arispe-Alburqueque et al.⁽¹⁾ This research in the area of medical education shows that there is no significant increase in the level of empathy of

some university students from the day they begin their medical studies until the day they graduate. Analyzing these results and contrasting them with the current social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the following is revealed: Because of the increase of people infected with



coronavirus 2 that causes Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV-2) and has generated until now (April 21, 2020) a fatality rate of 6.80,⁽²⁾ we have witnessed that many central governments in different countries have adopted social isolation as a public health measure; however, many citizens have been assuming not very empathetic behaviors.

To get an idea of the citizen response to face the crisis, six days after the first case of COVID-19 in Peru was known, thousands of people went to supermarkets and pharmacies to buy alcohol, toilet paper, and masks in an exaggerated way, without considering that their closeness to other people could increase the risk of infection, also leaving shortages of the necessary tools for health professionals to prevent contagion.⁽³⁾

On the other hand, some health professionals avoided emergency care in hospitals and health centers for fear of contagion, which is understandable but not justifiable. This situation brings to mind what was discussed at the Third Regional Conference on Higher Education, where Latin American universities were urged to respond with empathy⁽⁴⁾ to the current challenges that a crisis involves in the various scientific and social fields.

For many years, with the impact of globalization and technology, hard skills (curricular academic knowledge) have been privileged neglecting soft skills (intrapersonal and interpersonal skills) in higher education centers. Although communication technology has impacted the way we interact giving the impression that we are more linked, the situation is certainly different.

Marrero et al.⁽⁵⁾ maintain that the use of various technological applications in a study center does not necessarily develop knowledge of socio-emotional skills in real situations, so the development of emotional intelligence is key to improving soft skills like empathy in higher education.

Among the various study models of Emotional Intelligence (EI), the Bar-On model is a reference,⁽⁶⁾ which consists of five components: intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management and general mood. If the university students of medical sciences were educated in this model, the advantages would be diverse. For example: they could understand themselves emotionally; they would be more cautious in their choice of words when addressing their patients; their interpersonal relationships would be more fruitful because they would listen assertively and they would develop more empathy; they could define a problem and find a solution; and lastly, they could face the development of their profession in the face of a pandemic with a greater vocation of service.

Something that could contribute to the development of vocation of service is to include epidemiological surveillance in university teaching with the active participation of health professionals and university students, as it is in Cuba, since long ago these professionals and students have been making house-to-house visits to be able to detect patients who present prodromal signs and / or symptoms of viral diseases such as dengue, zika, chikungunya and yellow fever.⁽⁷⁾ It is known that, at the present



time, thousands of medical science students in Cuba support the active research work carried out by the Ministry of Public Health (MINSAP) against COVID-19,⁽⁸⁾ creating a positive impact both in the student and the society.

In conclusion, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 has revealed the lack of empathy in society, a situation that also compromises the health professionals in some countries even during their university education, as it is demonstrated in the article by Arispe-Alburqueque et al.⁽¹⁾ Therefore,

it is necessary that the university professor of medical sciences considers the current situation as an opportunity to reflect and promote the practice of soft skills at all levels of care and recognizes that they do not act as "companions" for hard skills, but are essential to be able to work and develop as a professional that meets the requirements of the professional profile that the university curriculum offers to the students, thus providing society a high quality service.

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Conflict of interests

All authors declare no competing interests.

Contribution of authorship

All the authors participated in the discussion of the results and have read, reviewed and approved the final version of the article.

