

# A student in your doctor's clinic?

## Here's why that's excellent news

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Involving medical students in clinic not only results in better training for them, but also in higher clinical productivity and potentially better patient care.

You've been waiting a while to visit your doctor and are keen to get a better sense of what's behind the various distressing [symptoms](#) you've been experiencing over the past couple of months.

After struggling to find a parking spot and sitting in the waiting room for half an hour, you're finally told that the doctor will see you. But to your surprise, the doctor walks up to you with an eager-looking medical student by her side and asks whether you'd mind having the medical student tag along and observe the assessment.

Or, perhaps the doctor asks you if you'd be open to having the medical student assess you first (followed by an additional review with the doctor). You're a typically nice and helpful person, but it seems to you like agreeing to this might just mean an intrusion upon your private time with the doctor and (if the student assesses you first) an unnecessarily redundant assessment.

But before you respond, it might be worth considering why – contrary to what we might think – having a student on board is actually an *excellent* thing for patient care. First and foremost, it helps to know that having students involved in clinic certainly has no adverse effects on patient outcomes or satisfaction – as seen, for example, in these three studies (Azher 2013, Regan-Smith 2002, Prislin 2001).

Of course, there's also that rather altruistic benefit that we're all aware of – in the form of an outstanding educational experience for the medical students, translating into better-trained doctors to care for you and yours in the very near future. Each and every doctor practicing today owes much to the patients throughout our training who helped improve our clinical skills and left us with unforgettable impressions of what certain diseases look like.

Clinic/hospital postings are a critical component of medical student training. An indeed, a recent observational study from Johns Hopkins University published in Neurology: Clinical Practice found that students (67 participants) were much more likely to have effective learning experiences and recommend the clinic to peers when they were given more opportunities to interview patients and present their impressions to the doctors supervising them.

But more interestingly, the researchers examined the clinical productivity of the supervising doctors (43 participants) during clinic sessions when students were present versus when they were absent. Clinical productivity improved significantly – by 35-42 per cent on all measures – when students were present in the clinic, compared to the same doctor's average with no student. In fact, the *more* involved the students were in clinic – i.e. the more patient interviews and assessments they were able to perform – the more productive their supervisors became.

Most interestingly, aside from better training and more patient care getting done, something else truly remarkable happens to improve care the moment we include medical students in the same room as the doctor and patient. The mere presence of another observer – even one in a more junior/subordinate position – results in a definitive improvement in the doctor's behavior towards their patients.

Perhaps even unknowingly, we begin to pay greater attention to our patient's complaints, take greater efforts to communicate clearly and empathetically, maybe become more comprehensive in our assessments (after all, it's tougher to insist on something silly like “one issue per visit” when there's a second person in the room who knows that few major medical conditions present as a single issue). This very real phenomenon of altered (generally-improved) behavior in the real/perceived presence of an observer is called the Hawthorne Effect, and chances are it will work in your favour as a patient.

So, it seems that actively involving medical students in the clinic is associated with not only better educational experiences, but also greater clinical productivity, and likely better individual patient care. Hopefully, these findings will motivate more physicians to open their clinics to medical students – and more patients to be open to being assessed by them.

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