

Abstract

Feedback is a key facilitator of clinical learning in medical student education. Feedback practices may vary according to prevalent cultural and contextual factors. There is extensive literature on feedback in western settings while there is a lack of detailed studies in the South Asian region. This study aimed to explore how feedback is conceptualised and practised in the clinical education of medical students in Sri Lanka.

The study was conducted in three medical schools and affiliated hospitals that represent the cultural diversity of Sri Lanka. Purposive sampling was utilized to recruit clinical teachers and students who would provide rich information for the study. The study had three components: an observation study, interviews with clinical teachers and focus group discussions with clinical students. During the observation study, video recording was used as a data collection tool to observe feedback in real life clinical teaching/learning settings. A constructivist grounded theory approach was adapted for analysis so that current practices and perceptions can be explored inductively.

This study showed that feedback was conceptualised as unidirectional and given by the teachers to the students. While feedback was often provided without being openly acknowledged as feedback, a significant quantity of feedback was provided based on observation of the students' performances. Feedback conversations were commonly on the knowledge domain and made through question-answer-comment sequences. While the main focus of feedback was error correction, both the teachers and students expressed the need to improve reinforcement of desired behaviour in feedback conversations. Students welcomed a direct approach to corrective feedback while both teachers and students recommended avoiding harsh feedback strategies. Encouragement of reflection and discussion of a follow up plan were limited. Cultural and contextual factors such as the hierarchical societal and workplace culture, the institutional culture, the curriculum, and approaches to faculty development impacted feedback practices in the Sri Lankan context.

The findings of this study help understand feedback practices in the Sri Lankan clinical teaching settings and highlight certain advantages and disadvantages in these practices. The findings could be used as an evidence-base to improve feedback practices in the region.