Foundation course and early clinical exposure-experience of first-year medical students

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When we found out that we would be students at a medical school, we were ecstatic. We were excited to be a part of an institute that provides excellent academic training without holding back on other fronts that promoted our holistic development.

From the get-go, all the faculty and the administrative staff were extremely warm and welcoming, willing to assist us at every point.

Finding out that college would start earlier than scheduled did dampen our spirits, but upon reaching, we were elated. This was primarily because of how our college handled all the new developments that came with the revision of the curriculum.

The highlights of the new curriculum were, without a doubt, the Foundation Course and the Early Clinical Exposure sessions.

The Foundation Course was built to teach the core values and principles of an Indian Medical Graduate into our impressionable minds. It eased us into a routine that we were going to follow for the foreseeable future. Most of our education until this point was comprised of a pen and paper method of learning, but the addition of Early Clinical Exposure (ECE) to our curriculum played a pivotal role in steering us away from this system. The purpose of the ECE module was to expose Phase I medical undergraduates to clinical aspects of their curriculum.

We were impressed by the array of topics that the Foundation Course material included. There were several skills that we needed to familiarize ourselves with before we could set foot into the world of medicine.

The sessions were conducted by the faculty of all the departments. This played a massive role in increasing accessibility to facilities and helped us build a better student-teacher rapport.

The institution kickstarted the course with an introductory session. We drank in the view and sat eagerly with our heads resting on our hands, eyes as big as marbles, an almost cartoonish expression mirrored on all our faces. Slight exaggeration aside, this indeed was a life-changing moment that we would always cherish and remember. Our parents were invited to attend the Induction Programme with us. We distinctly remember it being bittersweet, but our parents were laughing. Thinking back on it, the cause for their mirth was probably “these kids can hardly pick out matching socks, how will they handle living away from home?”

We all felt Lilliputian in comparison to the classroom, which was akin to Gulliver.

The first session was an icebreaker where partners were to introduce each other and explain why they chose to pursue medicine. Some witty answers even drew a laugh from students and teachers alike.

We had sessions on etiquette and the role of doctors in society. This was a group discussion, and many students voiced their opinions. Some extremely relevant points were made.

One of the most interactive and exciting sessions was on Group Dynamics, wherein two teams of eight students each were assigned a task based on a hypothetical situation. We collaborated seamlessly, putting our differences aside to complete the task at hand. We exhibited sportsmanship and a level of cooperation. These activities were a good indication of what was expected from us once the course was underway.

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All these activities overlapped with us getting accustomed to our hostel life and surprisingly hectic mess timings and bathroom schedules!

Another memorable day in the Foundation Course was the campus visit. We explored our campus extensively, covering everything from the classrooms to the Learning Resource Centre and the Auditorium.

The visit to the Forensic Department marked our foray into learning from cadavers. It certainly was the highlight of our day.

Our visit to the hospital threw some light on the vast syllabus of our course. To us newcomers, the hospital felt like a labyrinth, an ever-expanding maze that we would have to work our way around through the years.

To register everything that we saw and were taught, we were assessed through Google Forms after each class. The forms let us reflect on each aspect of the sessions of the day as they effectively recapped our learning.

Interspersed amongst these informative sessions were a few "let-your-hair-down" sessions. In these, we enjoyed a game of Bingo, Pictionary, and Dumb Charades. We also had some on-field games of throwball, volleyball, and cricket. It was a refreshing break to enjoy some time under the sun.

Some remarkable advice we received (that some of us still follow religiously to this day!) was “Don't study.” Although the teacher did explicitly mention “Don't study now, study once your classes start”, we took the first phrase to heart and let the rest go over our heads. However, we were learning how to strike a balance between work and play. Almost as if to emphasize the importance of this very balance, the White Coat ceremony was held. This was an auspicious occasion of great sentimental value to all of us as it marked the onset of our formal training.

The program took off with a pleasant introductory note and the lighting of the lamp. Facilitators from all the Phase I departments handed over the coats to the students. This symbolized the duties and responsibilities that we would have to shoulder henceforth.

We were on cloud nine as the realization that those “scalpels” and the “stethoscopes” from our beloved Doctor sets were no longer toys but rather tools with which we would make a difference hit us like a truck.

On this positive note, the Foundation Course drew to a close. Through this course, we learned to respect the differences in perspectives on various matters of importance. This benefit had particularly far-reaching implications.

While the difficulties faced by us were few and far-between, initially, it was challenging to get accustomed to the timings (9 am to 5 pm).

We believe that by including more review sessions on critical concepts like First Aid and CPR, we would feel more confident about our knowledge in these areas.

It was an unforgettable experience, but more on that later.

Once our classes started in earnest, we got busy and how. The ECE module successfully reduced the stress caused by our rigorous schedule as it offered a fresh insight into everything we were learning.

Each ECE module had specific learning objectives that outlined our task for that topic. Our facilitators aided in this by organizing activities, thought-provoking discussions, informative visits to the hospital. These classes helped us map out concepts concisely and helped us identify areas of strength and weakness. Additionally, they provided an effective way to tackle the focus conundrum as we were all ears for the entire duration of all the sessions that were held. Since we were divided into batches of fifty students, it made it easier for us to collaborate and attempt to diagnose clinical case scenarios.

Unique and innovative ways were employed by each department, making the classes hard to miss.

The most beneficial aspect of the biochemistry ECE module was the group discussions that clarified our concepts.

The inclusion of videos about the topic and detailed explanations helped cement our understanding of fundamental concepts. This played to our advantage, especially in a clinically oriented subject like Physiology.

Anatomy ECE sessions helped spark an interest within us by directing us towards a self-dependent learning system.

Post-session questionnaires and Formative Assessments were the methods of testing us on our concepts. Apart from this, we also had feedback forms, which helped make the good aspects of each session better.

For us to participate actively in class, we needed to read up on the topics being covered. While it made for an exciting read, it also added to our end-of-the-week stress levels. The real problem arose with classes being held on Saturdays. We don’t know about you, but our idea of a lazy Saturday does not include sitting with a bunch of drowsy and grumpy young adults in the itinerary. In subsequent classes, we learned to prioritize our tasks to avoid stress caused by ECE sessions and lack of preparation for the same.
One way that we can think of to make ECE more hands-on would be by allowing us to observe actual doctor-patient interactions and taking up more clinically relevant case scenarios.

To wrap it all up, it would be negligent to overlook all the other lessons learned, like personality development, coordination, and an increased zest for knowledge.

The Foundation Course and the ECE module have been instrumental in making our first year of college cherishable. We used to consider sleep as man’s greatest treasure, but the current curriculum has added another contender vying for that spot. As far as thank yous go, we do have Foundation Course and ECE to thank, and we certainly are disciplined. Well-mannered and honest (speaking of honesty, we love our sleep) students. We are signing off with our wishes for the next batch!

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