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Meeting real patients: a qualitative study of medical students' experiences of early patient contact

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Background and Aim: Teaching communication skills is an important task in the medical curriculum. It is widely agreed that the ability to communicate with the patient is just as important as biomedical knowledge and technical skills. At University of Copenhagen we have conducted a course in early patient contact (EPC) for first semester medical students since 1986. The course is integrating theoretical and practical skills inspired by a modification of Kolb's learning cycle. Every student interview a patient three times during the course and personal reflection is supported. The aim with this study was to examine first term medical students' personal experiences and challenges with early patient contact.

Method: A qualitative design was adopted, with data from written logbooks and focus groups interviews with medical students who had recently completed an EPC course. Data were analysed with a grounded theory approach.

Results: We found that meeting with a real patient – a person – was a central point of learning. Students' perceptions and reflections on their future profession and personal skills were broadened. Students became respectful of a patients' life and illness experiences, and their understanding of communication as central to a doctor's daily work increased. In students' views 'patients were turned into persons' and they discovered that they actually learned something from every patient. Furthermore professional communication was experienced as a skill rather than the innate ability to talk to other people.

Conclusion: Our results deepen the current knowledge of students' benefit from EPC by taking it into first-term students' perspectives and focusing on the personal experiences and challenges that the students met during the course. More integration of the patient in the learning processes in medical students is recommended and further research in the combination of theoretical and practical communication skills is recommended.