

Original Article

Introduction of Mentorship Program for Undergraduate MBBS Students at AIIMS Bibinagar: Students' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

A mentor is a more experienced person who guides a younger person/mentee, usually in the same field as that of the mentor. As the mentor has already walked the path, he/she is better able to guide the mentee academically, professionally and also personally to some extent. All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Bibinagar, is a new institute that started in August 2019 with a batch of fifty undergraduate MBBS students followed by 2020 batch of sixty two students. Mentorship program was started for these 112 students but due to Covid pandemic there was lot of disturbance in regular teaching which frequently shifted to online mode and then again to offline mode as per the covid situation. Throughout the covid pandemic, the mentorship program continued. This paper attempts to determine the perception of students on mentorship program and also on the feasibility of mentoring even in adverse times.

Key Words: Mentoring, Medical students, MBBS, Mentor, Mentee

Introduction

The word “mentor” in the present day is used both as a verb where it means “to advise or train”, and also as a noun where it signifies a person who is “An experienced and trusted adviser”. [1] In

medical colleges, mentoring is an informal partnership between the mentor and mentee. It is a mutual partnership between two persons in which mentor delivers his knowledge, skills and experiences to a mentee for the latter's personal and professional development. Mentor should understand that mentoring is different from coaching and counseling and his aim should be to improve mentee's critical thinking and problem solving abilities [1]. The challenges faced by medical students are unique as the curriculum is totally new and different and it is expected that the students should/ will quickly acquire specific skills and adjust to the assigned roles and challenges [2]. Hence, it is felt that medical education is generally more stressful than other streams of education [3]. It has been observed that a mentorship program early in the career of medical students will help in the development of their personal and professional attributes.

Aim of the Study

To introduce mentorship program for undergraduate medical students at a newly established medical institute and to determine the students' perceptions about this program.

Materials and Methods

This was a prospective observational study conducted over a period of one year from April 2021 to March 2022 at AIIMS Bibinagar, Hyderabad. The study was questionnaire based and the subjects were 112 undergraduate students of 1st and 2nd MBBS.

INCLUSION CRITERIA:

- MBBS students who were part of the Mentorship Program as mentees
- The mentees who were willing to answer the questionnaire/feedback form

EXCLUSION CRITERIA:

Those not willing to answer the questionnaire were excluded

A total of 112 MBBS students of 1st and 2nd MBBS formed the study subjects. All the 112 students/mentees were assigned mentors ie faculty who had volunteered to take on the role of mentors.

There were 28 mentors and 112 students and the mentor-mentee ratio on an average was 1:4.

Being a mentee and a mentor was voluntary. For both batches, the Students Mentoring Committee of the Institute conducted one hour priming lecture on Mentoring during their introductory foundation course. Later a verbal consent was taken from the mentees for being a part of the Institute's Mentoring Program. For faculty, a mentor self-assessment form was given wherein a brief on the role of mentor was given. A written consent was taken from faculty to take on the role of a mentor wherein they committed to spend time with the mentees and to do the needful. Both the mentors and mentees were directed to meet each other in person at least once per month and more frequently as per the requirement. Due to the covid pandemic, the teaching activities suffered somewhat and dedicated time could not be given for mentoring and during those months the mentors and mentees were encouraged to be in contact with each other via phone, email and other online options.

A pre-designed proforma based on the Leikert scale was prepared and this form was validated for its face validity by two experts who understood the topic who checked to confirm if it effectively captured the topic under investigation. After a year, when the pandemic situation came to near normal and the students were recalled to the institute, this feedback proforma was administered to them as a Google form. (Table 1).

The forms were collected and analyzed for the students/mentees' responses about the Mentorship Program

Table 1 Feedback Form for Perceptions of students

Sr. No.	Perceptions of students	Score
1	Improves the grades or other measures of academic performance of the youth being mentored.	
2	Improves class attendance for those being mentored.	
3	Improves mentored youth's self-esteem and confidence.	
4	Mentoring has a lasting impact.	
5	Monthly one hour meeting is sufficient time for this program	
6	This program gave me a perspective on future career options.	
7	This program helped me to deal with my personal/social/other problems in a better way.	

8	Being in the mentorship program affected academic performance negatively.	
9	The program compared well with my expectations	
10	I would recommend this program to my peers	
11	I would like to continue in this program for the next year	
12	How do you think the program could be improved? (descriptive note to be written)	

(1- Not at all true, 2 – Not true, 3- Not sure, 4 – True, 5- Very true)

Based on the above score, the outcome was quantified as number/percentage of students who found the Mentorship program beneficial, found it neutral and the percentage of students who felt it had adverse effect.

Observations and Results

The study population comprised of 112 MBBS students from 1st and 2nd professional year.

The questionnaire/feedback form was prepared as a Google form and was shared with students of 2019 and 2020 MBBS batches. Out of total 112 students, 107 students submitted the google feedback forms, summarized in Table 2. Before administering the feedback, students were informed of the importance of honest feedback and how their feedback can improve the mentorship program.

Table 2 Perceptions of students (Feedback Form)

Sr. No.	Perceptions of students	Score 1	2	3	4	5
1	Improves the grades or other measures of academic performance of the youth being mentored.	9.3%	9.3%	27.1%	44.9%	9.3%
2	Improves class attendance for those being mentored.	7.5%	11.3%	33%	39.6%	8.5%
3	Improves mentored youth's self-esteem and confidence.	4.9%	11.7%	19.4%	51.5%	12.6%
4	Mentoring has a lasting impact.	9.4%	4.7%	34.9%	38.7%	12.3%
5	Monthly one hour meeting is sufficient time for this program	5.6%	15.9%	27.1%	32.7%	18.7%
6	This program gave me a perspective on	11.2%	12.1%	34.6%	34.6%	7.5%

	future career options.					
7	This program helped me to deal with my personal / social/other problems in a better way.	12.1%	16.8%	32.7%	32.7%	5.6%
8	Being in the mentorship program affected academic performance negatively.	49.5%	32.7%	8.4%	8.4%	0.9%
9	The program compared well with my expectations	13.1%	14%	36.4%	33.6%	2.8%
10	I would recommend this program to my peers	7.5%	12.1%	21.5%	51.4%	7.5%
11	I would like to continue in this program for the next year	7.5%	11.2%	20.6%	46.7%	14%
12	How do you think the program could be improved? (descriptive note to be written)	Students inputs are given below				

(1-Not at all true, 2 – Not true, 3- Not sure, 4 – True, 5- Very true)

Out of 107, only 50 students gave suggestions/inputs that have been summarized as below:

-A good number of students expressed that there were benefits but they are not obvious/are intangible while some expressed uncertainty about benefits of this program and also wished that their mentors could give them more time.

-Most of the students asked for dedicated time for mentor-mentee interaction.

-Most of the students had the perception that the mentor was supposed to take the lead and arrange for the interaction every time. But it should be a two way process as taking initiative for the meeting lies with both mentor and mentee.

-Many students expressed preference for in-person mentor-mentee interaction rather than the online platforms.

-A few students suggested group mentoring session for common topics of interest like preparation for exams. Otherwise, most of them were comfortable with individual meeting with the mentor.

-Many students also expressed that their mentors were supportive during the covid pandemic time and cleared their doubts regarding the disease, complications, vaccination etc.

Verbal feedback from some of the mentors also reinforced the lack of dedicated time.

Discussion

Mentoring is a supportive partnership between two persons wherein the mentor gives or shares his knowledge, skills and experiences with a mentee so that the mentee can develop personally and professionally. Mentoring is not equivalent to coaching and counseling wherein, more emphasis is given to acquisition of skills and to resolution of problems by professional help respectively. Mentoring focuses on how to improve the mentee's critical thinking and problem solving abilities and to make the mentee responsible for his/her decisions [1]. Mentorship programs were available in the USA as early as the 1970s, but formal mentoring programs for medical students and doctors started to gain popularity in the late 1990s. [4]

Mentoring can be executed through formal and informal mechanisms. Formalized mentorship is set by a third party in which the mentors and mentees are paired and the choice of either may not be taken into account, whereas, informal mentorship happens by way of an interpersonal relationship between a mentor and mentee. Both the mechanisms of mentorship are effective, depending on the mentor and mentee. [5]

In our institute, the formalized method is followed for the following reasons: The mentors are assigned in the first year itself as this is the time when students are most vulnerable and are in need of mentors. The medical students in India are very young when they start their course, compared to

the West. For most of them it is the first time that they would have left the comfort zone of their homes, and have to adjust to a new city/state with different language, culture, hostel stay and the gruelling medical studies. They have to adapt quickly to a new way of life and if mentors are provided at this juncture, they can provide the much needed support and guidance. In our institute the Student Mentorship Program Committee members under the guidance of the Dean (Academics) are the third party who prepare the mentor-mentee pairing lists along with phone numbers, and circulate it to both mentors and mentees. Another reason for formalized method is because the volunteering faculty are not many in number and also if choice of mentor is given to students, all may flock to the faculty of clinical departments who are already busy with patient care services and simultaneous teaching activities. It is also likely that as the students are new to the environment, they may hesitate to choose or not choose a mentor at all.

During our study period, due to covid pandemic, the regular teaching was affected due to sudden declaration of holidays, intermittent, irregular shifting of teaching to online mode, and loss of teaching hours. Due to these reasons, a dedicated time slot could not be allotted for mentoring activities as the entire focus was on timely completion of syllabus and on ways to compensate for the lost teaching hours.

However, the mentors and mentees were encouraged to be in touch via online mode by creating small Whatsapp groups, or meet via various online platforms and most of them agreed and accepted the online mentoring. Almost 80% mentees responded that their mentor had created a Whatsapp group and was in touch with them.

In the present study, almost 45% mentees felt that mentoring improves the grades or other measures of academic performance of the youth being mentored, though we had not objectively checked the pre-mentoring and post mentoring grades of students. Guhan et al studied the effectiveness of mentoring in 148 first year medical/MBBS students and observed that the mentorship program significantly improved the academic performance

of students, especially of the below average performers. [6]

In a similar study by Ghawji M et al almost 50% of the surveyed students believed that the mentorship program helps the professional growth and grade improvement of the students. [7]

In the present study, 51.4% students responded that they would recommend this program to their peers and 46.7% expressed that they would like to continue in this program for the next year. The reason for these slightly low percentages could be that the students did not meet their mentors in person due to covid constraints and lack of dedicated time towards mentoring. But on the other hand, it is heartening to note that at least 50% students responded positively to mentoring and this can be attributed to the role of online communication channels that were open between the mentor and mentees.

Overall, one third percentage of students expressed as 'unsure' for many questions which can be explained by the lack of in-person meetings with mentor and also due to the uncertain times of covid pandemic, wherein, an overall sense of doom had prevailed. In a similar study by Xaviour R et al from Kerala, India, that collected responses from 110 first year medical undergraduates, the authors observed that almost 64% students responded that mentoring program is needed for all students and is beneficial [8].

The advantages of Mentoring for medical undergraduates have been described by various workers. In a study by Ong et al, 69.6% junior doctors, who were the mentees, found substantial improvement in their confidence; where as 95.8% mentees reported that mentoring had significantly helped their career progression in medicine [9].

A clinical supervisor concentrates mostly on education planning, the training required for preset goals and conduction of assessment/examination to determine the performance. On the other hand, a mentor encourages personal development and offers psychological support, and hence, is more approachable as compared to a supervisor, from the perspective of a student. [10]

Ghahramani S et al from Iran, in their study on mentoring first year medical students observed that

53 percent of the mentees believed that mentoring had a positive impact on them and helped them to adjust faster to the new environment. They also observed a statistically significant increase of grade point average in the score of those mentees who were enrolled in the mentorship program as compared to those who weren't [11].

In the present study, a few students suggested that the mentor can address all his mentees at the same time for common topics of interest like preparation for exams or while giving the names of learning resources, academic related goals, etc. For personal interaction, one to one meeting was suggested. Tan et al in their 2019 review study, suggested smaller groups of five to eight mentees when the primary focus was on providing personal support, and larger group sizes while discussing professional challenges [12]. Karunasri et al in a similar study observed that in their institute, majority of the students ie almost 78% were exposed to group mentoring and only 17.4% had one-to-one individual mentoring [13].

One of the frequently faced challenge that the students expressed was of difficulty of scheduling meetings due to clashes in mentor/mentee schedules and suggested dedicated time for mentoring sessions. Similar setback was encountered by Vahed et al as described in their study [14].

Some of the mentees expressed that the mentors didn't take initiative to set up meetings and were under the impression that it is solely the mentors' responsibility to fix meetings. Though this aspect was clarified during the priming session of foundation course, still this misconception persisted in some of the students. Zerzan et al in their study have written about the mentee 'managing up' the relation ie, the mentee should take responsibility for his or her part in the mutual alliance and should steer the relationship to make the most of the mentor's efforts and time so that both parties are benefited [15]. They also mention that mentees should take responsibility for managing the meetings. We think that as it is a reciprocal and voluntary relationship, both mentor and mentee should take equal responsibility to take forward the relationship in all aspects of initiation and participation.

Mentoring is a two way process and it not only helps the mentees but also the faculty by way of giving internal satisfaction and by promoting the personal development of the faculty. [6] It confers respect and greater recognition on the mentors. The institution also gets benefited by incorporating and promoting Mentoring by way of overall improved harmony, and a better conducive environment [16].

In the present day there is a concept of “Reverse Mentoring” where there is a reversal of the traditional roles of mentor and mentee, ie a more junior specialist takes on the role of mentor and a generally older, more experienced specialist is in the role of mentee. [17] It is applicable to the field of medicine and to education though not literally to undergraduate medical teaching. This concept of reverse mentoring is particularly utilized in the Information and Technology industry where younger generations give recent updated inputs on the latest in technological advancements. [18]

Due to the unprecedented Covid pandemic, many challenges and changes were seen in the medical education globally. The curricula had to be shifted to online platforms and so were other activities like mentoring, counseling, etc. In our situation, we continued mentoring by online communication and found a positive response. In fact, mentoring was all the more necessary during Covid times due to the uncertainty of the situation. Zibold et al from Germany also observed that their online mentoring was successfully received by the participants [19]. Rios IC et al from Brazil in a similar study observed that virtual mentoring worked as an important student support system. The mentee students reported that they felt cared for, supported and grateful. They observed that the meetings allowed a good interaction and produced beneficial effects [20].

Adrekani A et al did a systematic review on student support systems for undergraduate medical students during the COVID-19 pandemic. They concluded that the various studies proposed that online methods for support can be as effective as face-to-face strategies and should be adopted. Medical students all over the world were vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic and needed support both mentally and academically

and that the online methods can be continued even in normal times. [21]

Conclusion:

The student mentorship program has been received well by the MBBS students and the students think that the benefits of such program are often intangible. Most of the students expressed willingness to continue in the program for the next year. Dedicated time for mentor-mentee interaction is essential for the program to be beneficial. Mentoring relies heavily on the connection and communication between the mentor and mentees and, hence, can be successful to some extent even when only online communication options are available such as in the covid pandemic situation.

Recommendations:

Based on above study, it is recommended that the student mentorship program committee members should address the students of all MBBS batches to introduce them formally to Mentorship Program and remove any misconceptions.

- Mentorship program should be voluntary for mentees and mentors.

- Dedicated time of one hour per fortnight should be made available for mentor-mentee interaction and it should be integrated within the students' teaching time-tables.

- Institute should conduct workshops by external experts aimed at mentors to clarify their role in Mentorship program and this is especially helpful when the institute has more of young/ new faculty in the role of mentors.

- Feedback from Mentors should also be taken.

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