Curriculum Highlight – Foundations Phase

After several years of planning by hundreds of faculty and students, the UW School of Medicine launched the first phase of its new curriculum for first-year students in the fall of 2015. This curriculum was envisioned, planned and developed through a collaborative model, utilizing the expertise and talents of faculty from across the WWAMI region. A key tenet of the new curriculum is a model of continuous improvement. Through a robust evaluation and feedback process, involving faculty and students, improvements are already being recommended and implemented.

The Foundations Phase is an 18-month period consisting of interdisciplinary block courses that integrate the basic sciences, clinical medicine and social sciences. It replaces the traditional discipline-based first-year curriculum and organ-system based second-year curriculum. Students complete the entire Foundations Phase at their home University (University of Washington, Gonzaga University, University of Wyoming*, University of Alaska Anchorage, Montana State University, and the University of Idaho).

The Foundations Phase begins with a two to three week Immersion period where students learn the essentials of taking a medical history and the physical exam. The Foundations Phase is comprised of seven integrated blocks. In year one, blocks include the Molecular and Cellular Basis of Disease, Invaders and Defenders, Circulatory Systems, Blood and Cancer and Energetics and Homeostasis. Year two blocks are Mind, Brain and Behavior and Lifecycle and Reproduction. Human Form and Function (anatomy), Pathology/Histology and Pharmacology are integrated into every block as curricular Threads.

During Foundations, students have no more than four hours (with no more than one hour of lecture) of classroom contact time for four days each week. Instruction is more active—often employing a “flipped” classroom approach where students prepare in advance and use class time for clarification, case-based discussion and clinical problem solving.

Building on the Immersion experience, the fifth day is dedicated to the longitudinal “Foundations of Clinical Medicine” course which spans the full 18-month period. In this course, students spend one day every other week in a primary-care office. In the alternate week, they learn more in-depth clinical skills.

Students are required to complete an independent investigative inquiry research project (Triple I) during the summer after their first year of medical school. They can choose among five options: a hypothesis-driven laboratory project, a clinical or health services project, a community-based immersion project, a simulation-based research project or a global health immersion program.
University of Wyoming students who began medical school in 2015 and 2016 will join student colleagues in Seattle to complete the final term of the Foundations Phase.

**Consolidation and Transition Block**

The Consolidation and Transition Block at the end of the Foundations Phase was designed to allow students to solidify their basic science knowledge, engage in an individualized self-study plan for and complete the USMLE Step 1 exam and to prepare for the transition to clerkships. The 12-week block is a distance-learning course, allowing students to be physically located anywhere with a reliable internet connection. “The distance-learning approach also ensures that all of our students across the five WWAMI states have access to a consistent curriculum,” said Meghan Kiefer, M.D., M.P.H., Assistant Professor, Division of General Internal Medicine, Department of Medicine, who also served as Block Director.

The Block begins with a two-week Foundations Capstone designed to both reinforce learning and review challenging material and to be Boards-relevant. Students must complete three required sessions and then may tailor the program to their own needs by choosing twelve of 20 diverse selective options. To develop the content, Dr. Kiefer and colleagues conducted a broad canvas of block leaders, block faculty and students to identify both important material and gaps in information. “In addition to building a review curriculum for students, this process has provided good feedback on the inaugural run of the Foundations curriculum and helped to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement,” said Kiefer.

The second portion of the Consolidation and Transition Block is dedicated to independent study for and completion of the USMLE Step 1 exam. Students are required to submit an individual study plan. In addition to an on-line library of resources, students have access to learning skills specialists. In response to student interest in peer-based assistance, two M.D./Ph.D. students in the Medical Scientist Training Program (MSTP) hold episodic virtual “office hours” that are available to students at each of the regional sites.

Transition to Clerkships is the final segment of the course. According to Kiefer, it is the beginning of the transition away from the pathophysiology of medicine to what students need to know in the clinical environment. During this time, students meet with their college mentors, clerkship directors and others to prepare for success on the clinical wards.