

The need of formative assessment: the assessment FOR learning

Roshana Shrestha

Associate Professor, Department of General Practice and Emergency Medicine, Dhulikhel Hospital, Kathmandu University, Nepal

A 59 years old female with a history of diabetes mellitus, diagnosed of breast cancer stage 4 is unhappy with her doctors including the oncologist, primary care physician, pulmonologist and endocrinologist (all board toppers). She is frustrated that her doctors doesn't listen to her concern and orders new tests and prescribes new medication during each visit.

Do we experience this with a family member or as a healthcare professional?

Can a better assessment system help her get better holistic care?

CORRESPONDENCE

Dr. Roshana Shrestha

Associate Professor

Department of General Practice and Emergency Medicine, Dhulikhel Hospital, Kathmandu University, Nepal

Email: roshanashrestha@yahoo.com

Assessment is an extremely powerful drive of learning for students. Students emphasize their learning on what is usually asked during assessments and they “study for the test”. Traditionally it is dominantly relying on summative assessment which is served as a judgment to determine merely whether a student can be awarded a pass-fail decision or not. Moreover, the summative assessment mostly focuses only on the knowledge and skills domain leaving other attributes of a “competent doctor” mentioned by globally accepted CanMed model⁽¹⁾ (Medical expert, communicator, collaborator, leader, health advocate, scholar and professional).

It is important to note that the nature or timing of a test does not make it formative or summative. The distinction between summative and formative assessment is the “for learning” purpose of the assessment⁽²⁾. Three necessary conditions for a learner to engage with formative assessment are:

(i) the learner needs an understanding of the standard of performance to which he or she aspires, (ii) the learner needs information about the gap between his or her performance and that standard, and (iii) the learner needs a range of strategies to remedy that gap⁽³⁾. Any assessment can have both the formative functions and summative functions

of assessment. From this perspective, all assessments are summative- unless they are used to provide constructive feedback to students to raise their engagement, self-regulation and reflection as well as the autonomy required for lifelong learning.

This assessment OF learning or summative assessment is certainly valid and fundamental. However, assessment should also be FOR learning to boost learning of the student during the educational process. This is attained by formative assessment, which promotes rather than simply measure learning(4). Most medical institutions in Nepal highlight on summative assessment to compare between students and for institution profiling. Formative assessment is not a mandatory inclusion in the curriculum and is currently neglected and underutilized in our setting. In most places, the faculty has not received any formal training on giving effective feedback. The learner is primarily driven by the need to perform well in assessments and is focused on getting good grades only in knowledge and skills domains without paying attention to other soft skills like communication and professionalism which is paramount in General practice.

There is an urgent need for an integrated system of formative and summative assessment in medical

education in our setting with a focus on effective feedback culture. While continuing importance of summative assessment, which asks whether students have met criteria for passing, the formatively focused assessment system should be designed including all the domains of competencies and practiced by giving quality feedback to students which will help them to improve, develop, and grow to become a “competent doctor”.

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