Experiences of medical students who are first in family to attend university

A synopsis of the article Experiences of medical students who are first in family to attend university by Brosnan C, Southgate E, Outram S, Lempp H, Wright S, Saxby T, Harris G, Bennett A, Kelly B, in the journal Medical Education.

What can we learn from this article?

In this qualitative research study, the authors sought to characterize and synthesize the experience of medical students who were the first in family (FiF) to attend university. Such students are under-represented in medicine and may have different challenges and barriers than students who were raised with family members who have already attended schools of higher education. The authors performed open-ended interviews with 22 FiF students at a single Australian medical school and performed thematic analysis guided by Pierre Bordieu’s framework describing three forms of “capital” that can affect a person’s ability to succeed within a sociocultural environment: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital. The authors found that, as expected, FiF students reported perceived lower levels of social, economic, and cultural capital. Students described a lack of social capital, which led to feeling isolated from family members who could not relate to the students’ experiences, limited their sense of camaraderie with fellow students, and hindered their ability to obtain preferred clinical rotations. Students reporting lack of economic capital described skipping meals rather than asking a family member for money and feeling anxious about being placed somewhere new for a clinical rotation. Some of these students maintained part-time jobs during medical school. Students reporting lack of social capital felt a sense of disconnect from their families and communities of upbringing and felt that they were stuck between two worlds, yet did not fully belong to either.

How does it relate to medical education practice?

This study is a thoughtful and sensitive evaluation of a group of students whose struggles may be invisible to many faculty members. As UCSF strives to recruit a medical school class that is diverse in all aspects, and continues with the Bridges curriculum, which focuses on care for patients as individuals in all their diversity and complexity, this study provides important information for all faculty members and students. In particular, Bridges Coaches should be aware of the potential struggles of FiF students, so that they can support these students to the best of their ability and connect them to appropriate resources.

Interested in reading more? See Brosnan, C., Southgate, E., Outram, S., Lempp, H., Wright, S., Saxby, T., ... Kelly, B. (2016). Experiences of medical students who are first in family to attend university. Medical education, 50(8), 842-851.