Can near-peer medical students effectively teach a new curriculum in physical examination?

Students in German medical schools frequently complain that the subject clinical examination’ is not taught in a satisfying manner due to time constraints and lack of personnel resources. While the effectiveness and efficiency of practice-oriented teaching in small groups using near-peer teaching has been shown, it is rarely used in German medical schools. We investigated whether adding a new near-peer teaching course developed with student input plus patient examination under supervision in small groups improves basic clinical examination skills in third year medical students compared to a traditional clinical examination course alone. Third year medical students registered for the mandatory curricular clinical examination course at the medical faculty of the Technische Universität München were invited to participate in a randomised trial with blinded outcome assessment. Students were randomised to the control group participating in the established curricular physical examination course or to the intervention group, which received additional near-peer teaching for the same content. The learning success was verified by a voluntary objective structured clinical examination (OSCE). A total of 84 students were randomised and 53 (63%) participated in the final OSCE. Students in the control group scored a median of 57% (25th percentile 47%, 75th percentile 61%) of the maximum possible total
points of the OSCE compared to 77% (73%, 80%; p< 0.001) for students in the intervention group. Only two students in the intervention group received a lower score than the best student in the control group. Adding a near-peer teaching course to the routine course significantly improved the clinical examination skills of medical students in an efficient manner in the context of a resource-constrained setting.

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