

Using Problem-Based Learning to Teach Physician Assistant Competencies: Does Practice Make Perfect?

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Introduction: Physician Assistants are expected to be increasingly adept at managing a broad range of patient care challenges in ambulatory settings, including complex skills outlined in the Competencies for the Physician Assistant Profession¹. Although PA curricula include didactic content about the competencies, providing students with practical, hands-on opportunities to apply this information is challenging, particularly in the academic year of PA education. As interest in addressing the competencies has grown, so has interest in developing ways to effectively teach these skills. **Methods:** To determine if a problem-based learning course could be a successful platform for the development of student competencies, the Oregon Health & Science University PA Program incorporated office-based skills, chronic disease management and health promotion /disease prevention tasks into an ongoing PBL course. During the course, students completed tasks representing skills across the competencies, including coding and billing, laboratory data management, prescription refill requests, telephone triage, completion of admission and discharge orders, cost containment, formulary usage, development of problem lists and medication lists, and general chart upkeep. An 11-item Likert scale survey was administered before and after the course to ascertain student preparedness for dealing with explicit tasks required of primary care providers in clinical practice. **Results:** The data showed significant improvement in all skill areas. Students universally felt better prepared to manage common issues related to ambulatory practice after completion of the course, responded favorably to the PBL “simulated practice” and gained valuable understanding of the importance of these competencies in the “real-world.” **Discussion:** Competencies in office-based skills, chronic disease management and health promotion/disease prevention strategies can be taught successfully using a problem-based learning format. Exposing students to these tasks in the didactic year provides opportunities to encourage the development of competencies in practical skills prior to the start of the clinical phase of education.