

Learning clinical practice

How do you learn clinical practice? What should we do to ensure that the right numbers of skilled, safe doctors are in the right places to provide the healthcare that the people of South Sudan need?

Clinical practice is learnt from a balance of teaching and experience, and the most valuable experience for the young doctor is challenging experience. By its very nature, this is stressful. Workload is significant – there is a difference between coping in a busy clinic and being overwhelmed. But other factors are also important. Young doctors need to be committed to mastering difficult tasks, and sustaining their effort and confidence in difficult conditions. To work safely they need to work with more experienced colleagues, who can provide supervision, feedback, support and encouragement. To ensure they get the right experience they need to work to a curriculum, and within a programme, so that their learning can be managed.

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So, postgraduate medical education (PGME) should offer young doctors teaching, clinical experience, supervision and support. It should be able to assess their progress, and to recognise when they are ready for safe, independent practice. Senior doctors must lead and strive to improve medical education. In their turn, junior doctors must be committed not only to learning their profession, but also to delivering healthcare to the people of South Sudan when and where it is needed.

The new Basic Medical Training (BMT) curriculum, which was launched in April 2013, offers young doctors a programme of teaching and clinical work experience leading towards safe, independent practice. Its launch provides a framework for the future development of PGME in South Sudan.

The initiative is being supported from the UK with clinical and educational expertise, but central to its success are the doctors of South Sudan, both senior and junior, whose leadership, commitment and skills are critical.

There is much still to do, but the prize is significant: effective postgraduate medical education in South Sudan, and improved healthcare for the people of South Sudan. Or, to paraphrase Derek Bok (former president of Harvard University), if you think education is hard work, try working without it.

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