

# THE ALCMAEON PROJECT: AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE

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## Abstract

*The article promotes an alternative model of the history of medicine in medical universities. It is based on the European Alcmeon project whose aim is to overcome the gap between the clinical practice and historical perspective of medical humanities and strengthen the connection between medical practice, the history of medicine and medical humanities. The article introduces the project's objectives, outputs and activities. The project is developed within a partnership between education organisations, museums and universities from Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece and Romania. The paper highlights the educators' responsibility to demonstrate that medical history is part of evidence-based medical practice and it can be used to improve cross-cultural interventions and at the same time to promote the reform of health care provision. The project aims at updating the curriculum of medical humanities by offering medical humanity lecturers structured and harmonized materials which the medical humanities course relies on: anthropology of medicine, sociology of medicine, medical ethics and communication skills.*

**Keywords:** medical education, historical scenarios, anthropological medicine, students

## Context

Medical history is part of Medical Humanities courses available for undergraduate medical students. The history of medicine and medical humanities inform medical students about former physicians' efforts and contributions and introduce them to the evolution of medicine with its changes, breakthroughs and errors throughout times. Medical humanities broaden students' educational horizon by familiarising them with different and challenging alternative ways of thinking about and perceiving the world [1], influence their development and foster better relationships with the outside world [2]. Since the 1950s, the role of medical history in medical education has been redefined and a plurality of new branches such as medical sociology,

anthropology, medical ethics, communication skills, bioethics, narrative medicine, medicine in literature, medical anthropology and sociology, philosophy and history of science, creative arts have been integrated into the curricula depending on the higher education institutions and countries. Bioethics, for instance, began as an attempt to fuse ethics, humanities, and human values into medical education [3]. Given the diversity of fields, no wonder, this new context has brought about some confusion.

The responsibility of educators is to show students that medical history is part of evidence-based medical practice because it can improve cross-cultural interventions and at the same time it can promote a reform of health care provision. The Alcmaeon project represents an alternative model for integrating the history of medicine into medical education, and an attempt to overcome the gap between clinical practice and the historical perspective of medical humanities; to this end, historical evidence and historical scenarios are included in the contents of the medical courses. A partnership between museums and higher education institutions also supports the project's outputs.

### **Target groups**

The project addresses medical humanities lecturers, undergraduate medical students, museums and medical libraries curators, medical education researchers and national museum visitors.

### **The Project's objectives**

The project aims to:

- horizontally integrate the history of medicine into the medical humanities course together with other modules: anthropology of medicine, sociology of medicine, medical ethics and communication;
- understand undergraduate medical students' learning needs as different from history students' needs;
- support the teaching of the history of medicine by introducing real scenarios based on genuine evidence identified in museums in order to increase the role of evidence in understanding content;
- design a digital museum displaying medical exhibits such as sculptures, paintings, books and archaeological and anthropological material available in museums;
- offer museums an online space to promote their collections of exhibits related to medical history and medical humanities among medical students and health care professionals;
- design a training package for medical humanities lecturers and integrate the module of medical history in the teaching of medical humanities;
- develop a database of questions about curriculum contents to assess undergraduate medical students' competences in terms of medical humanities.

### **The Project's activities**

The project activities are organized as follows:

- mapping curricula of the course on medical humanities available for medical students and identifying medical schools involved in the teaching of medical humanities;
- organising focus groups on the history of medicine with medical history lecturers, medical education researchers, medical history researchers, museum curators, undergraduate and graduate medical students to identify barriers and facilitators in order to improve the history of medicine module in the medical humanities course;
- designing educational material for a 12 weeks module: clinical practice (i.e. evidence based medicine), medical ethics (i.e. health expectations and experiences in term of values and ethical principle change through the time), medical social sciences (i.e. lifestyle, environment, global health), communication skills (i.e. doctor-patient relationship);
- creating 8 case scenarios;
- identifying 8 readings (6000-8000 words) introducing the topics;
- developing a Digital museum to design historical scenarios;
- running workshops to assess the educational material;
- piloting the materials (interviews/questionnaires);
- developing an assessment toolkit.

### **The Project's outputs**

The project's partnership focuses on creating outputs and materials necessary for students to study the history of medicine such as: a medical training package for lecturers in medical humanities, a virtual video library with structured collections of medical history material which is integrated into the training package and is available in the digital museum and finally an evaluation toolkit to assess medical students' competences in medical humanities.

The virtual video library comprises experienced doctors' testimonials which are relevant to the history of medicine. This type of repository of resources consolidates the role of the history of medicine as a motivational drive acting as a bridge between the past, the present, and the future of the medical profession. The importance of past professional experiences and their impact on the strategic projection of the future of medicine, of what innovation means and what attitude one has to adopt towards the management of change in the medical areas are all relevant directions to those interested in a medical career.

The library will include 20 films with subtitles in English whose topics vary: physicians' roles and status throughout history (wartime, communism, revolution, prison, natural disasters earthquake, floods, hurricane, etc.), medical ethics in the past and today, medical schools: yesterday and today, surgery and its instruments throughout ages, semiology (diagnosis, treatment) - a retrospective approach, lifelong learning in medicine: professional challenges, innovation: case

studies solved with inspiration and perspiration, the relationship between the mentor and the mentee, doctor patient-relationship or conditioning medicine.

The videos will become part of the courses and lectures on the history of medicine. The recommended approach is to give students the list of videos accompanied by tasks to solve while/after watching a film. The tasks of the films will be discussed and debated in the class, such as:

1. Independent watching of the video following recommendation from the teacher; debate on the online forum;
2. Blended: independent watching of the video followed by class discussion
3. Use of the videos for career counselling and career guidance by the career departments in medical universities.
4. Use of the videos in events celebrating the medical profession (setting up of medical departments, hospitals and other health agencies).

Videos can successfully be used to teach important skills and knowledge to medical students; in addition, they provide students with excellent opportunities for reflection, personal problem solving, critical thinking and projection of their future medical responsibilities, which stimulates students' participation.

The videos have also paved the way for the flipped classroom method, where the video is watched at home allowing students to explore the topic in-depth in the classroom while the teacher creates meaningful learning opportunities and encourages co-creation of knowledge and collaboration. The videos and their testimonials can trigger a wide range of interactive activities engaging students in the content, in-depth laboratory experiments, original document analyses, debates or presentations, current event discussions, peer reviewing or project-based learning. More time can be spent in class on higher-order thinking skills such as problem-finding, collaboration, design and problem solving, personal choice and mindset as students tackle difficult problems, work in groups, research, and construct knowledge with the help of their teacher and peers.

## **Conclusions**

The project will impact on:

- the curriculum of medical humanities by offering medical humanities lecturers a structured and harmonized course which integrates social and anthropological medicine, medical ethics and communication.
- the perception of health, by examining health from several perspectives and highlighting the relevance of clinical practice, environment, finance and lifestyle and their dynamic interaction through medical humanities.

- the cooperation between museums and higher education institutions, where the collections available in museum are available for medical students through structured and validated educational programmes.

- national museums which are given the opportunity to approach medical history with the help of the expertise of faculties teaching medical humanities and present their collections to future visitors.

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