

Building Competence and Compassion:

Addiction Education for Medical Students

Amy Modi

Medical Student, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Introduction

As a medical student navigating my clerkships, the opioid epidemic shifted from an abstract concept to a painful reality. I witnessed a young woman from Hockessin tossing in her bed, sweat beading on her forehead as her body grappled with the physical torment of withdrawal. I took the history of a Wilmington resident whose years of legitimate pain, initially alleviated by an innocent prescription, fell prey to an insidious dependence. I watched a mother of two come to terms with the horrifying truth that immediate amputation was her only means of survival. I faced the stark reality that my community was a microcosm of a national crisis.

Despite its size, Delaware has become one of the states most severely impacted by the opioid epidemic. In 2022, Delaware recorded the nation's third-highest rate of drug overdose mortality, resulting in 549 lives lost. This marked a 24% increase in deaths compared to just two years prior.¹ Reflecting on these concerning statistics and my current role as a medical student, I wonder: are medical schools equipping future physicians with the tools and knowledge to address this complex crisis?

Gaps in Medical Education

The harsh truth is that medical education has not evolved alongside the escalating substance use disorder (SUD) epidemic. The accrediting bodies for MD and DO medical schools do not require a standardized curriculum on SUD.² The current state of medical education is perplexing. We dedicate significant time to understanding rare blood dyscrasias, conditions so uncommon that many physicians may never encounter them. Meanwhile, our emergency departments are overwhelmed, treating hundreds of patients struggling with opioid overdose and withdrawal every day. It is puzzling that such a widespread and devastating disease receives so little focus from those entrusted with healing.

Rotating medical students and residents often find themselves 'learning on the job,' particularly when their foundational training in specific areas could be more extensive. However, the sensitive conversations, detailed assessments, and thoughtful treatment strategies unique to addiction medicine are an art form that requires intentional instruction. As these future healthcare professionals enter the workforce, they must be prepared to engage in crucial discussions about addiction, recognize the subtle signs of SUDs, and confidently make referrals for treatment.

Some may argue that comprehensive SUD knowledge should primarily reside with internal or family medicine specialists. However, individuals suffering from SUDs are human beings who, like any other patient, may present with a myriad of health concerns spanning every medical specialty. Therefore, regardless of their chosen field, every physician should possess fundamental competence and compassion in addressing addiction. The current limited focus on addiction education is a disservice to the patients we are sworn to serve.

The PCOM Addiction Medicine Elective

Seeing the room for improvement in our traditional curriculum, students at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM) enthusiastically stepped up to develop a unique Addiction Medicine elective for second-year DO students in 2022. Guided by Dr. Frederick Goldstein, this elective offers engaging weekly two-hour evening sessions that effectively combine classroom learning with enriching hands-on experiences.

In the first week, the elective focused on understanding the disease model of addiction, emphasizing the complex biological, psychological, and social factors involved in SUDs. In the following weeks, students had the opportunity to engage directly with addiction medicine psychologists and physicians. Outside the classroom, students were fortunate to shadow support group meetings, such as Narcotics Anonymous. Hearing real-life stories from individuals in recovery provided a deeply personal and relatable perspective on addiction. Students also connected with community organizations like Prevention Point in Kensington, Philadelphia. Their volunteers walked students through hands-on opioid overdose simulations, giving them an opportunity to practice administering naloxone. This enriching curriculum taught students valuable skills and deepened their understanding of the local resources available to those facing addiction challenges.

Outcomes and Impact

The PCOM Addiction Medicine Elective made a significant impact, providing a clear direction for the future of medical education. Fifty students participated in the pilot elective and completed detailed pre- and post-course surveys that evaluated their comfort and competence in dealing with SUDs.³ The results showed marked improvements, illustrating a new generation of empowered physicians:

- Comfort in assessing patients for addiction increased dramatically from 20% to 100%.
- Comfort in discussing addiction with patients rose from 41% to 95%.
- Understanding of addiction as a disease improved from 66% to 100%.
- Knowledge of accessing community resources for treatment referrals surged from a mere 2% to 91% ($p < 0.01$).³

Broader Implications for Medical Education

With the escalating costs of medical education, it is imperative for medical schools to improve their curriculum to address the present healthcare challenges, particularly the SUD and opioid crisis. The success of PCOM's elective highlights the growing need for more standardized and interactive addiction education in medical schools across the country. At the very least, foundational training should encompass the neurobiology of addiction, screening tools, evidence-based treatments, and insights into community resources.

In addition, medical training should address stigma and foster a compassionate, patient-centered approach to SUD. Connecting with individuals in recovery, engaging in community outreach, and observing support group meetings provide invaluable experiences. These interactions offer a

genuine glimpse into the lives of those affected by addiction, helping students foster a deeper respect, empathy, and understanding that goes far beyond what they might read in textbooks.

Cultivating Delaware's Physician Workforce

PCOM is proud to be one of Delaware's medical schools through the Delaware Institute of Medical Education and Research (DIMER) program. DIMER students are warmly encouraged to return to Delaware to practice in both primary care and specialty areas. Since Delaware has been deeply affected by the opioid crisis, our future physicians who receive their training at PCOM through DIMER are set to play a crucial role in tackling this critical challenge and making a positive impact in our community.

This elective holds special meaning for many of us DIMER students, particularly because we are eager to give back to our hometowns. By delving into the challenges our communities face firsthand, we are not just honing our clinical skills; we are also learning how to support our neighbors. Enhancing addiction education offers an immediate and profound benefit to healthcare in Delaware, equipping future physicians with the tools they need to confront addiction, reduce stigma, and ultimately improve health outcomes.

Ms. Modi may be contacted at am2961@pcom.edu.

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2025, Jan 10). *Drug overdose mortality by state*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/drug_poisoning_mortality/drug_poisoning.htm
2. Morford, K. L., Tetrault, J. M., & Fiellin, D. A. (2024, June). The MATE Act: Progress for substance use education, but is checking a box enough? *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 39(8), 1496–1498. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11606-024-08652-7> PubMed
3. Caulkins, R., Klunk, A., Suttera, C., VanDuzer, K., & Goldstein, F. J. (2023). *Outcomes from an Addiction Medicine Elective for 2nd Year PCOM DO Students*. DigitalCommons@PCOM.
https://digitalcommons.pcom.edu/research_day/research_day_PA_2023/researchPA2023/29/

Copyright (c) 2025 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.