

Wilderness Medicine Curriculum for First Year Rural Program Students

Background:

The fields of wilderness medicine and rural medicine are closely intertwined. This relationship is perhaps even more apparent in the University of Colorado School of Medicine's Rural Program (CUSOM RP). During their clerkship year, CUSOM RP students live and learn in a rural Colorado location, many of which in remote areas of the state home to unique wilderness landscapes and their resulting medical pathologies. As such, a foundational understanding of wilderness medicine content was proposed to be helpful for CUSOM RP students. This project aimed to design a wilderness medicine curriculum for first year CUSOM RP students, deliver the curriculum, and evaluate for effectiveness in increasing student comfort in diagnosing and managing a subset of wilderness medicine pathology. A secondary aim of this project was to evaluate and enhance student perception of the importance of wilderness medicine training for future rural practitioners and garner interest in the field of wilderness medicine.

Methods:

A 1.5 hour session on high altitude physiology and illnesses was designed and given to 17 first year CUSOM RP students during their weekly rural didactic sessions. A pre- and post-session survey was conducted to evaluate student interest in wilderness medicine, student perception of the importance of wilderness medicine training for rural providers, students' perceived understanding of high altitude physiology, and student comfort in diagnosing and treating high altitude illnesses.

Results:

Following the high altitude session, student interest in wilderness medicine, understanding of high altitude physiology, and comfort in managing high altitude illnesses all significantly increased (p-values 0.49, <0.05, <0.05 respectively). Perceived importance of wilderness medicine education for rural providers also increased, although this difference was not significant (p-value 0.75).

Conclusions:

These results indicate that dedicated wilderness medicine didactic sessions for rural-bound medical students not only increase understanding of the wilderness medicine topic, but help to garner interest in wilderness medicine as well. More data is needed to re-demonstrate these patterns for other wilderness medicine topics and evaluate perceived usefulness of the session following rural clerkship.