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A different training model for adolescent medicine: a PhD program in Turkey, where adolescent medicine is not currently a subspecialty at this stage

Abstract: Adolescent medicine is currently not a certified subspecialty by the Ministry of Health in Turkey. Until recently, no subspecialty education was available for pediatricians interested in pursuing a career in this field. To compensate for the lack of training opportunities in the field, to meet the needs of adolescents and to increase research and strengthen scientific knowledge in the area of adolescent medicine, a doctoral program was established in 2004 by the Division of Adolescent Medicine under the Institute of Child Health at Hacettepe University in Ankara. This paper discusses the opportunities provided by the program, describing the pros and cons of such a course and what the program aims to achieve. This unique program provides pediatricians with extended postgraduate, subspecialty education in adolescent health care. We believe that the adolescent medicine PhD program at Hacettepe University could be a model for educating health care professionals in this field in other countries where there are not established fellowship programs.

Keywords: adolescent medicine; fellowship; PhD; Turkey.

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Introduction

Adolescent medicine, a subspecialty of pediatrics, is committed to enhancing the health status of youth and adolescents. This subspecialty takes a special approach to healthcare, considering all aspects of teen health – physical, emotional, mental and sexual to provide the best care possible. But there is a growing concern worldwide that the healthcare needs of adolescents are not being met. Despite vast evidence demonstrating the need for improved training of physicians in the area of adolescent medicine, due to lack of training opportunities and the small number of faculty specialized in this area, most medical students and pediatric residents will receive inadequate training in this field and will, therefore, not be fully comfortable managing the common problems of adolescents. This usually means adolescents receive their medical care from physicians in a number of specialties, which diminishes the possibility of a holistic approach.

There are over 23 million adolescents in Turkey (1), which means that the adolescent population in our country is even greater than the total population of many countries. These young people have a variety of problems both medical and psychosocial that may also differ in different regions of the country. According to research conducted in 2008 by the Prime Ministry General Directorate of Family and Social Research (2), the rates of adolescents who have tried addictive substances such as tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, glue-sniffing and ecstasy at least once were, respectively, 24.7%, 13.9%, 1.9%, 0.6% and 0.5%. The rate of adolescents who stated that they smoked everyday was 15.3%. This one example, as a communal problem of Turkey, indicates that this country has a huge need for adolescent health and medicine clinics and youth centers.

This paper discusses a different training model for new adolescent medicine clinicians. The doctorate program of adolescent medicine at Hacettepe University Child Health Institute provides a unique, single-discipline (Division of Adolescent Medicine at the Department of Pediatrics) training model using a multidisciplinary approach and collaboration to fulfill the needs of the country.
The history of adolescent medicine in Turkey

The physician Ihsan Dogramaci founded Hacettepe Child Health Institute in Ankara in 1957, which then became Hacettepe Children’s Hospital in 1958. This hospital was the foundation for the Hacettepe Faculty of Medicine in 1963 and the first Adolescent Medicine Clinic in Turkey in 1964. In 1967, Hacettepe University was founded from these structures, which actually had all the health-related faculties under the same umbrella for the first time in Turkey. As adolescent medicine clinicians, we are always proud that our clinic is even older than the university, and clearly this shows that the founders gave importance to adolescents, even during those years. Dr. Mithat Coruh was the founder of the clinic and worked at Hacettepe between 1965 and 1982, and Dr. Erol Kinik worked at the clinic between 1966 and 2000. As the second generation in 1999, Dr. Orhan Derman and Dr. Nuray Kanbur began work at this clinic and were trained by Kinik. After his retirement in 2000, this second generation completed their formal and international training in the United States and Canada. Now there is an active PhD program of adolescent health and medicine for pediatricians run by the Division of Adolescent Health, and Dr. Sinem Akgul was the first graduate as the third generation.

Ihsan Dogramaci, the founder of the whole institution had a broad vision and organized everything from the beginning. As Kinik mentioned, Dogramaci asked both Dr. Coruh and Dr. Kinik to work with teenagers, and Dr. Coruh trained directly under Ross Gallager in the US. Kinik was the person who kept the clinic alive and worked in the Adolescent Medicine Clinic for 34 years. During those years, most of the children’s hospitals in Turkey were seeing patients up until 13 years of age, but from the beginning, Hacettepe Children’s Hospital has seen patients up to 18 years of age, and the first Adolescent Medicine Clinic was started as an outpatient clinic for children between the ages of 10 and 18.

The Division of Adolescent Medicine at Hacettepe University has continued to provide healthcare to over 5000 adolescents per year. Since the number of physicians who have formal training in adolescent medicine is very limited, this division has many responsibilities. Our division provides not only patient care, preventive healthcare and counseling services, but also takes part in clinical research activities, training and teaching responsibilities.

Within Turkey, there exists a profound discrepancy between the need for adolescent healthcare and access to treatment. To date, very few divisions of adolescent medicine are functional, and a reason for the insufficient access to treatment is the relatively low number of professional experts in the field.

Training of medical students and pediatric residents

The system of medical training is different in Turkey, where students start medical school straight out of high school, and the program is a 6-year course. Adolescent medicine is an important component of medical training at our Faculty of Medicine. In phase one, students are introduced to the discipline of adolescent health and medicine. It is during their pediatric rotation in phase four that they receive lectures in physical growth, sexual development and psychosocial maturation in adolescence and also common problems in adolescence. When they reach phase five, they receive more specialized lectures such as eating disorders and their medical complications and also adolescent reproductive health and adolescent gynaecology. It is during this rotation that all students clinically observe in-patient visits with faculty members. The sixth and last year of medical school makes up the internship program. One or two interns every month will spend their paediatric rotation at the Division of Adolescent Medicine.

Pediatric residency is a 4-year course in Turkey. At the Department of Pediatrics in Hacettepe University, during the first 2 years, a resident will follow adolescent in-patients with supervision. It is also mandatory that during their training, each resident will work at the Adolescent Medicine Outpatient Clinic for a month. Although training in adolescent medicine is obligatory at our hospital, due to the lack of trained specialists and units specifically catering for adolescents needs in the country, an adolescent medicine rotation is not compulsory. This is a great problem for pediatric training in our country as pediatricians with no training and clinical skills oriented for the needs of this age group will not feel comfortable when working with them. Additionally an adolescent medicine rotation is compulsory for residents being trained in public health at Hacettepe University.

What post-graduate training opportunities are available for the field of adolescent medicine in Turkey?

Adolescent medicine is currently not a certified subspecialty by the Ministry of Health in Turkey, which means
that no subspecial education was available for pediatricians interested in pursuing a career in this field. Until recently, the only possibility of specializing in the field of adolescent medicine meant training abroad. To compensate for the lack of training opportunities in the field, to meet the needs of adolescents and to increase research and strengthen scientific knowledge in the area of adolescent medicine, a doctoral program was established in 2004 by the Division of Adolescent Medicine under the Institute of Child Health at Hacettepe University in Ankara (3). This program is certified by Council of Higher Education responsible for the supervision of all universities in Turkey.

The program offers post-graduate education in the field of adolescent medicine for pediatricians and aims at establishing age- and development-appropriate care for adolescents in Turkey. Students will have clinical practice in an adolescent clinic, take educational courses in the area of adolescent medicine and also be part of academic and research training, enhancing the development of new scientific advances in the field of adolescent medicine. Other professionals enrolled in other PhD programs such as nurses, dieticians, physiotherapists and physicians from other disciplines also have the opportunity to take courses available from the program as their electives.

The adolescent medicine doctoral program

The program is a 4-year program; in the first 2 years, the course provides subspecialty education in areas such as pubertal growth and development, clinical approaches to adolescent healthcare such as interviewing and confidentiality, psychological, cognitive and behavioral development of adolescents, adolescent mental health issues and psychopharmacology, gynecological diagnostic interventions and hormonal contraception, nutritional evaluation, eating disorders, obesity, substance abuse, sports medicine and chronic disease management in adolescents. During the last 2 years, a student designs and conducts a research project in the area of adolescent health and medicine, and the program is concluded with the successful completion of the doctoral dissertation. Each student enrolled in the program is required to spend 2 days/week in the adolescent outpatient clinic during the 4 years of the course. Gaining comfort in working with the adolescent populations and a sense of mastering skills needed during interviewing can occur only with consistent exposure. The probability of a successful alliance with an adolescent increases with a physician, who provides first contact and continuity. This is made possible through the 4 years of continued clinical practice.

The primary training site for students is the Division of Adolescent Medicine, but students will also be exposed to patients from other departments such as the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the Department of Dermatology and the Department of Orthopedics and Sports medicine due to the multidisciplinary approach practiced at the division. Although the core curriculum is composed of topics regarding adolescent health, students are also obliged to complete courses in other areas, but may choose the elective course they wish to take such as epidemiology, biostatistics and public health problems concerning adolescents.

PhD vs. clinical fellowship: what are the pros and cons?

Adolescent medicine is a clinical field, and until the establishment of this program, all available training programs offered fellowship training, which means training clinicians who primarily engage in the application of clinical knowledge to meet the needs of patients. Whereas PhD training involves research training that leads to a research degree, the PhD-trained persons engage in the generation and dissemination of knowledge, and this stands in contrast to the role of clinicians. What makes this program unique is that it combines clinical experience and research. What makes the program distinctive from other PhD programs is the essentiality of clinical experience. As previously mentioned, Turkey lacks academicians in this field.

A great advantage of a program like this is that it does not only train clinicians, but also academicians. Increasing the number of physicians who have formal education in the field will, in turn, help other academic institutions to start new adolescent medicine clinics through the leadership of the graduates of this particular PhD program and thus cover the needs of the country in this area.

Although great strides have been made with the establishment of this program, it is important to emphasize the difficulty for pediatricians interested in pursuing subspecialty training in this field to comply with this post-graduate doctoral courses. The course is very different from a fellowship in Turkey, where the fellow would also be a full time employee of the hospital. A fellowship is also a job, and the difference is that many fellowships have a program sponsor that provides funding as a stipend for a fellowship. This sponsor is either the Ministry of Health
or the universities themselves for other pediatric subspecialties in Turkey. As our program is not accredited as a subspecialty by the Ministry of Health, the only source for funding is the Child Health Institute of Hacettepe University. Only two out of ten PhD students to date were able to have full-time, funded positions during their training.

A pediatrician completing a doctoral course is also a student who is required to work 2 days a week to complete the clinical, academic and research training as a mandatory part of the course requirements. One of the biggest challenges since the establishment of the program has been in the enrollment of students as this is quite challenging for an individual employed elsewhere. Thus, we believe that accreditation of an adolescent medicine fellowship by the Ministry of Health will, with the provision of adequate numbers of leaders and trainers by our PhD program, cover a great gap in the field of adolescent medicine.

What will this PhD program achieve?

– Providing high-quality healthcare for all adolescents in Turkey by ensuring they receive age-specific services in a setting strictly designed to meet their needs.
– Providing subspecialty services for adolescents with more complex problems unique to the adolescent period.
– Providing the dissemination of knowledge as the needs for expertise and resources to train pediatric residents and medical students in this field continue.
– Increasing scientific advances in the field by increasing research in adolescent medicine.
– Increasing the multidisciplinary collaboration with other disciplines of medicine working with adolescents.
– Combining the clinical and outreach perspectives of this discipline by increasing the intersectoral collaboration for adolescents as a model for Turkey.

Conclusion

The challenges in further developing the field of adolescent medicine at an international level are many. Numerous countries have restricted health budgets and so have few economic resources to fund adolescent-specific services. Like Turkey, there are significant areas of the world where the established medical systems do not recognize adolescent medicine as a discipline distinct from pediatrics, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology or family practice. We believe that it is important that the academic field of adolescent medicine joins the ranks of other subspecialties in pediatrics globally.

This unique program provides pediatricians with extended, postgraduate, subspecialty education in adolescent healthcare, which may be a model for educating healthcare professionals in the field in other countries that have not established a fellowship program yet. In the future, the accreditation of an adolescent medicine fellowship by the Ministry of Health of Turkey will provide a number of leaders and trainers through our PhD program and will bridge a great gap in the field of adolescent medicine in the country.

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References

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