SEXUAL HEALTH COMPETENCIES FOR UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL STUDENTS

Preamble

A WHO working definition for sexual health is “a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

When the term “sexual health” is used in these competencies below, it may refer to any or all of the following where appropriate: sexual anatomy, physiology, and genotype, sexual development, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, sexual identity, sexual response, sexual practices, and sexual behaviors and the range of their frequencies as they apply across the lifespan.

The sexual health competencies below have been developed to map to a pre-existing reference set of physician competencies that serve as an existing framework for medical educators within the larger competency domains (Englander, 2013). The italicized statements below are taken directly from the existing reference set of physician competencies, while the numbered components below are the specific sexual health competencies that we have authored. In mapping to a pre-existing competency framework, it is possible that these sexual health issues can be integrated throughout the curricula where these larger physician competencies are already taught or achieved. These specific competencies were authored by a group of sexual health content experts over the course of 11 months, went through several iterations, included providers across several disciplines, and who had experience working with patients across all areas of development. These competencies may also serve as a reference for other health professional disciplines that may adapt them to meet the specific training needs of their providers.

Competency Domain: Patient Care

Gather essential and accurate information about patients and their conditions through history taking, physical examination, and the use of laboratory data, imaging, and other tests by:

1. Sensitively and effectively elicit relevant sexual health information from all patients in a developmentally appropriate manner.
2. Performing a complete and accurate physical exam with sensitivity to sexual health matters across the lifespan.
Make informed decisions about diagnosis and therapeutic interventions patient information and preferences, up-to-date scientific evidence, and clinical judgment by:

3. Assisting the patient in making informed decisions about sexual health

Counsel and educate patients and their families to empower them to participate in their care and enable shared decision-making by:

4. Assessing their needs and tailoring counseling and treatment recommendations with consideration to any special needs, impairments, or ability levels it relates to sexual health.
5. Recognizing the sexual health risks and challenges often encountered by specific populations, including sexual and gender minorities, and tailoring communication and counseling efforts to specific populations, boost resilience, and reduce high-risk sexual behaviors.

Provide health care services to patients, families, and communities aimed at preventing health problems or maintaining health by:

6. Providing effective patient-centered primary care and anticipatory guidance by utilizing screening tests, preventive interventions, and health care maintenance for sexual health,

Competency Domain: Knowledge for Practice

Apply established and emerging biophysical and psychological* scientific principles fundamental to health care for patients and populations by:

1. Defining and describing the following as they relate to sexual health across the lifespan: sex, sexuality, sexual anatomy and physiology, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, sexual identity, sexual practices, sexual behaviors, and sexual relationships, reproduction, sexual abuse and violence.
2. Defining and describing the range of sexual behaviors and practices, and their frequencies, across cultures and the lifespan.
3. Understanding common differences in sex development (including but not limited to intersex conditions), their epidemiology and management as it relates to one’s sexual health.
5. Understanding sexual physiology in sexual health.
6. Understanding the impact of co-morbid medical and psychiatric conditions, and substances (medications, alcohol, illicit substances, etc.) on sexual health.
7. Describing the forms of sexual trauma, their impact on sexual health, and strategies for individualized management.

Apply established and emerging principles of clinical sciences to diagnostic and therapeutic decision-making, clinical problem solving, and other aspects of evidence-based health care,

8. Understanding and evaluating common sexual concerns, their potential etiologies
Apply principles of social-behavioral sciences to the provision of patient care, including assessment of the impact of psychosocial and cultural influences on health, disease, care seeking, care compliance, and barriers to and attitudes toward care by:

* “psychological” added from the original Englander document

**Competency Domain: Practice-Based Learning and Improvement**

Identify strengths, deficiencies, and limits in one’s knowledge and expertise by:

1. Demonstrating the ability to elicit feedback about patients’ experiences in the healthcare system regarding sexual health.
2. Demonstrating the ability to assist the patient in accessing care when the physician conscientiously objects to providing the care requested.

Locate, appraise, and assimilate evidence from scientific studies related to patients’ health problems by:

3. Identifying important clinical questions as they emerge in the context of caring for the sexual health of patients, and using technology to find evidence from scientific studies and/or existing clinical guidelines to inform clinical decision-making and improve sexual health.

**Competency Domain: Interpersonal and Communication Skills**

Communicate effectively with patients, families, and the public, as appropriate, across a broad range of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds by:

1. Developing rapport with all individuals (patient, families, and/or members of the health care team) to promote respectful and affirming interpersonal exchanges as it relates to discussing sexual health related concerns.
2. Recognizing and respecting the sensitivity of certain clinical information pertaining to sexual health, and involving the patient (or their guardian) in the decision of when and how to communicate such information to others.
3. Recognizing the complexity of linguistic barriers of communication across languages in caring for patients’ sexual health and navigating these barriers including the use of interpreters

Demonstrate insight and understanding about emotions and human responses to emotions that allow one to develop and manage interpersonal interactions by:

4. Recognizing common forms of implicit (i.e., automatic or unconscious) bias and
assumptions may adversely affect verbal, nonverbal, and/or written communication strategies involved in patient care as related to sexual health.

**Competency Domain: Professionalism**

*Demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness to a diverse patient population, including but not limited to diversity in gender, age, culture, race, religion, ability\(^1\), and sexual orientation by:*

1. Recognizing and sensitively addressing every patient’s and family’s healing traditions and beliefs, including sexual health-related beliefs, and understanding how these might shape reactions to diverse aspects of sexuality.

*Demonstrate respect for patient privacy and autonomy by:*

2. Recognizing the unique aspects of confidentiality regarding sexual health and by employing appropriate consent and assent practices.

*Demonstrate accountability to patients, society, and the profession by:*

3. Accepting shared responsibility for eliminating disparities, overt bias (e.g., discrimination), and developing policies and procedures that respect all patients’ right to sexual health care, including facilitating access to appropriate care.

**Competency Domain: Systems Based Practice**

*Advocate for quality patient care and optimal patient care systems by:*

1. Explaining and demonstrating how to navigate health care systems, and the special legal, insurance, and policy issues affecting sexual health.

*Coordinate patient care within the health care system relevant to one’s clinical specialty by:*

Identifying and appropriately using resources available to support the sexual health of patients.

*Participate in identifying system errors and implementing potential systems solutions by:*

2. Explaining how sexuality biases affect health care inequalities, costs, and outcomes.
3. Describing strategies that can be used to enact reform within existing health care institutions to promote sexual health as a part of overall health and well being for all patients.

*Incorporate considerations of cost awareness and risk-benefit analysis in patient and/or population-based care by:*

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\(^1\) “Ability” is not included in the original text, so we will clearly denote this as added text.
4. Demonstrating the ability to perform an appropriate risk/benefit analysis for sexual health interventions where evidence-based practice is lacking.

**Competency Domain: Interprofessional Collaboration**

*Work with other health professionals to establish and maintain a climate of mutual respect, dignity, diversity, ethical integrity, and trust by:*

1. Valuing the importance of interprofessional communication and collaboration in providing culturally competent, patient-centered sexual health care.
2. Understanding the multifaceted nature of sexual health and the inclusion of multiple specialties as appropriate in the provision of sexual health care.

**Competency Domain: Personal and Professional Development**

*Practice flexibility and maturity in adjusting to change with the capacity to alter one’s behavior by:*

1. Through reflection, critically recognizing and assessing one’s own implicit biases in providing sexual health care, and developing strategies to mitigate these.
   2. Understanding the dynamic nature of sexual health knowledge and of sexual health values in one’s self, patients, and society
REFERENCES

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World Health Organization’s definition of sexual health:
sexual health is:
“...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.” (WHO, 2006a)

WAS Declaration of Sexual Rights, revised 2014. The World Association for Sexual Health (WAS) revised declaration was approved by the WAS Advisory Council in March, 2014.

Clinician Competencies for Sexual Health from Sexual Health Fundamentals for Patient Care Initiative [www.sexualhealthfundamentals.org], which was guided by principles established by a consensus committee of renowned experts in female sexuality, led by co-chairs Michael Krychman, MD, and Susan Kellogg Spadt, CRNP, PhD. 2010


Royal College of Nursing. Sexual health competences: An integrated career and competence framework for sexual and reproductive health nursing across the UK. London, England: Royal College of Nursing. 2009. Accredited by the RCN Accreditation Unit from November 2008 to November 2011, subject to an annual statement being submitted to the Accreditation Board confirming that the competences remain current.