Clinical teaching—that is, teaching and learning focused on, and usually directly involving, patients and their problems—lies at the heart of medical education. At undergraduate level, medical schools strive to give students as much clinical exposure as possible; they are also increasingly giving students contact with patients earlier in the course. For postgraduates, “on the job” clinical teaching is the core of their professional development. How can a clinical teacher optimise the teaching and learning opportunities that arise in daily practice?

Strengths, problems, and challenges

Learning in the clinical environment has many strengths. It is focused on real problems in the context of professional practice. Learners are motivated by its relevance and through active participation. Professional thinking, behaviour, and attitudes are “modelled” by teachers. It is the only setting in which the skills of history taking, physical examination, clinical reasoning, decision making, empathy, and professionalism can be taught and learnt as an integrated whole. Despite these potential strengths, clinical teaching has been much criticised for its variability, lack of intellectual challenge, and haphazard nature. In other words, clinical teaching is an educationally sound approach, all too frequently undermined by problems of implementation.

The importance of planning

Many principles of good teaching, however, can (and should) be incorporated into clinical teaching. One of the most important is the need for planning. Far from compromising spontaneity, planning provides structure and context for both teacher and students, as well as a framework for reflection and evaluation. Preparation is recognised by students as evidence of a good clinical teacher.

How doctors teach

Almost all doctors are involved in clinical teaching at some point in their careers, and most undertake the job conscientiously and enthusiastically.

However, few receive any formal training in teaching skills, and in the past there has been an assumption that if a person simply knows a lot about their subject, they will be able to teach...
it. In reality, of course, although subject expertise is important, it is not sufficient. Effective clinical teachers use several distinct, if overlapping, forms of knowledge.

How students learn
Understanding the learning process will help clinical teachers to be more effective. Several theories are relevant (see first article in this series, 25 January). All start with the premise that learning is an active process (and, by inference, that the teacher’s role is to act as facilitator). Cognitive theories argue that learning involves processing information through interplay between existing knowledge and new knowledge. An important influencing factor is what the learner knows already. The quality of the resulting new knowledge depends not only on “activating” this prior knowledge but also on the degree of elaboration that takes place. The more elaborate the resulting knowledge, the more easily it will be retrieved, particularly when learning takes place in the context in which the knowledge will be used.

Experiential learning
Experiential learning theory holds that learning is often most effective when based on experience. Several models have been described, the common feature being a cyclical process linking concrete experience with abstract conceptualisation through reflection and planning. Reflection is standing back and thinking about experience (What did it mean? How does it relate to previous experience? How did I feel?). Planning involves anticipating the application of new theories and skills (What will I do next time?). The experiential learning cycle, which can be entered at any stage, provides a useful framework for planning teaching sessions.

Questions
Questions may fulfil many purposes, such as to clarify understanding, to promote curiosity, and to emphasise key points. They can be classified as “closed,” “open,” and “clarifying” (or “probing”) questions.

Closed questions invoke relatively low order thinking, often simple recall. Indeed, a closed question may elicit no response at all (for example, because the learner is worried about being wrong), and the teacher may end up answering their own question.

Effective teaching depends crucially on the teacher’s communication skills. Two important areas of communication for effective teaching are questioning and giving explanations. Both are underpinned by attentive listening (including sensitivity to learners’ verbal and non-verbal cues). It is important to allow learners to articulate areas in which they are having difficulties or which they wish to know more about.
experts’ clinical reasoning and decision making (not easily articulated in a didactic way). There are close analogies between teacher-student and doctor-patient communication, and the principles for giving clear explanations apply. If in doubt, pitch things at a low level and work upwards. As the late Sydney Jacobson, a journalist, said, “Never underestimate the person’s intelligence, but don’t overestimate their knowledge.” Not only does a good teacher avoid answering questions, but he or she also questions answers.

Exploiting teaching opportunities

Most clinical teaching takes place in the context of busy practice, with time at a premium. Many studies have shown that a disproportionate amount of time in teaching sessions may be spent on regurgitation of facts, with relatively little on checking, probing, and developing understanding. Models for using time more effectively and efficiently and integrating teaching into day to day routines have been described. One such, the “one-minute preceptor,” comprises a series of steps, each of which involves an easily performed task, which when combined form an integrated teaching strategy.

Teaching on the wards

Despite a long and worthy tradition, the hospital ward is not an ideal teaching venue. None the less, with preparation and forethought, learning opportunities can be maximised with minimal disruption to staff, patients, and their relatives.

Approaches include teaching on ward rounds (either dedicated teaching rounds or during “business” rounds); students seeing patients on their own (or in pairs—students can learn a lot from each other) then reporting back, with or without a follow up visit to the bedside for further discussion; and shadowing, when learning will inevitably be more opportunistic.

Key issues are careful selection of patients; ensuring ward staff know what’s happening; briefing patients as well as students; using a side room (rather than the bedside) for discussions about patients; and ensuring that all relevant information (such as records and x ray films) is available.

Teaching in the clinic

Although teaching during consultations is organisationally appealing and minimally disruptive, it is limited in what it can achieve if students remain passive observers.

With relatively little impact on the running of a clinic, students can participate more actively. For example, they can be
The patient’s role

Sir William Osler’s dictum that “it is a safe rule to have no teaching without a patient for a text, and the best teaching is that taught by the patient himself” is well known. The importance of learning from the patient has been repeatedly emphasised. For example, generations of students have been exhorted to “listen to the patient—he is telling you the diagnosis.” Traditionally, however, a patient’s role has been essentially passive, the patient acting as interesting teaching material, often no more than a medium through which the teacher teaches. As well as being potentially disrespectful, this is a wasted opportunity. Not only can patients tell their stories and show physical signs, but they can also give deeper and broader insights into their problems. Finally, they can give feedback to both learners and teacher. Through their interactions with patients, clinical teachers—knowingly or unknowingly—have a powerful influence on learners as role models.

Drs Gabrielle Greveson and Gail Young gave helpful feedback on early drafts.

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One hundred years ago

A “surgical marvel” at the London Hospital

That modest institution the London Hospital, which does so much good by stealth and doubtless blushes to find it fame, and which has been the scene of so many surgical triumphs, has, if the Pall Mall Gazette is to be believed, almost beaten its own record. A man was “stabbed through the heart” and afterwards “had the puncture sewn up at the hospital.” The operation, says our contemporary, was, though not unique, a very remarkable one. Remarkable indeed it must have been beyond anything in the annals of surgery to the description of it given by the Pall Mall Gazette is correct. After being informed that “an operation on the heart is difficult, not only owing to the paramount importance of the organ, but because of its deeply-imbedded position in the body, and in order to do his work the surgeon had to temporarily displace the breast, cartilage, ribs, and lungs,” we are further told that “it was at first thought that the heart itself would have to be removed.” Fortunately this formidable contingency was avoided, for, “on washing away the blood clots and raising it a little the puncture was found.” The man, we are glad to learn, continues to participate.