

Behind an intern's eyes: Thoughts on Internship Program in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The internship is a time period during which a medical graduate gets the required practical experience in a clinical setting under senior supervision. Internship act as a bridge to complete the void between the years of learning and putting it into actual practice and serves to gear up the graduates with relevant clinical skills, experience, and knowledge. Furthermore, internship serves to gear up the graduates with relevant clinical skills, experience, and knowledge that they will be required to perform on a day-to-day basis when they go ahead with their professional careers. One of the key issues that has been voiced frequently in numerous platforms of Nepal seems to be the stipend currently provided to the interns by the hospital management. Even though universities have laid out their description of their internship program, the job description of interns still remains vague in a hospital setting which has led interns into doing work that does not fulfill the learning objectives of internship at all and has allowed hospitals to employ interns in various settings overlooking their working hours and limits. The culture of making interns and residents work for unaccountable hours in the name of learning suits the hospital management and ultimately lessens their need to hire skilled professionals creating another set of unemployment problems down the road. There is also an increased incidence of depression, anxiety, fatigue, and panic attacks among interns and it is very important for senior professionals and hospital management to address them in time by creating a positive and encouraging work environment, accessibility to support groups, and restricting work hours.

Keywords: internship; medical intern; intern; internship in Nepal

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INTRODUCTION

An internship is a time period during which a medical graduate gets the required practical experience in a clinical setting under senior supervision. As a medical graduate, all of us have come through years of exhaustive learning and training on diverse subjects and topics. Internship acts as a bridge to complete the void between those years of learning and putting it into actual practice. Furthermore, internship serves to gear up the graduates with relevant clinical skills, experience, and knowledge that they will be required to perform on a day-to-day basis when they go ahead with their professional careers.

Format of internship

Talking about the general format of internship in Nepal, it spans a time period of twelve months which consists of scheduled rotations in different departments after which the medical graduates are eligible to gain a temporary registration from Nepal Medical Council (NMC) and practice medicine as a primary care doctor.¹ Comparing the internship programmes of other countries, the British system has a two year Foundation Programme; a two year long training period after graduation which serves to develop the clinical and professional skills of graduates for effective patient

care.² The Australian System has a system consisting of a one-year internship in an accredited hospital to gain full medical registration status, however not necessarily the same hospital as the graduate's medical school.³ In India, medical graduates go through a similar one-year period of medical internship to gain a permanent medical license.⁴ On the other hand, in the United States of America, internship has been incorporated as the first year of residency programs where medical graduates go to residency directly after their graduation, and the first year of residency is considered as an internship.⁵

Positive aspects

Highlighting the positive aspects of the internship, it provides a learning platform for medical graduates to acquire cognitive skills as well as practical experience to practice medicine under the supervision and guidance of senior professionals. An internship gives the young trainees a taste of the medical field and provides them self-realization as to what medical field they are most suited for and should pursue in their professional careers. Many senior professionals would agree that the work ethics and medical approach that is learned during the internship period get instilled in one's mind forever. An internship gives young graduates the unique privilege of working with medical professionals and being a part of a medical team, where they can observe and contribute to the work put in by all the members of the team to offer patients compassionate and professional care. Apart from that, they can get unique perspectives from established professionals about medical career and a peak into what lies ahead after internship. Besides technical skills, doctor-patient relationship is a vital part of learning for graduates in the way physicians deal with their patients, especially in regards to communication, counseling, treatment and empathizing with the problems of their patients. This interaction is the major influencer of not only patient satisfaction but also physician satisfaction as well which every aspiring physician must keep in mind.⁶ Similarly, rounding with the attending physician is an indispensable part of the educational process and active participation during rounds provides the interns the opportunity to work on their communication skills, understand medical processes and management approach, and understand their role in the medical team and patient care.⁷ Meanwhile, The

learning aspect of the internship is often neglected, and therefore it is most important for senior professionals to organize various programs that can not only benefit the learning process but provide a break from the regular duties. Mediums like Continuing Medical Education (CME), Case presentations, Skills training, and Journal clubs are essential to the academic growth of interns.⁸ In these highly demanding and competitive times, internship can be an important learning period during which interns can hone their research skills and work on their journal reading habits as well.⁸

Scenario in Nepal

In light of the current scenario, it is important to address various issues that are being currently faced by interns throughout the country. One of the key issues that has been voiced frequently in numerous platforms seems to be the stipend currently provided to the interns by the hospital management. There seems to be a big discrepancy in the amount allocated by different hospitals and timely payment has still not been guaranteed, especially in private medical colleges. Even after taking into account economic inflation and an increase in medical fees, the stipend has seen very little increase from the past times. Even though universities have laid out their description of the internship program, the job description of interns still remains vague in a hospital setting.⁸ This confusion has led interns into doing work that does not fulfill the learning objectives of the internship at all and has allowed hospitals to employ interns in various settings overlooking their working hours and limits.⁸ Making interns process hundreds of discharges and filing works and making them run personal errands of consultants and residents only serves to rob their precious time of internship that could be utilized in learning something relevant to their future line of work. During this vital period of grooming young graduates into competent physicians, depriving them of key learning experiences during this period can have a very detrimental impact on their career and the healthcare system of the nation as well. At the same time, the working hours, night duties, days off, holidays, and personal leave are vastly overlooked in all medical institutions.⁸ Internship has also provided a medium for medical colleges in the country to employ manpower for a very low payroll with no restrictions on their working hours and duty. This culture of making interns and residents work for

unaccountable hours in the name of learning suits the hospital management and ultimately lessens their need to hire skilled professionals creating another set of unemployment problems down the road.

Mental health and internship

During the period of internship, academic pressure, as well as work-related stress, can cause burnout among the trainees leading to emotional exhaustion, feeling isolated, and low work satisfaction which can contribute to medical error and impact patient care directly.^{9,10} Moreover, this can lead to depression, suicidal ideation, substance abuse, and problems in personal relationships. There is also an increased incidence of depression, anxiety, fatigue, and panic attacks among interns and senior professionals and hospital management needs to address them in time by creating a positive and encouraging work environment,

accessibility to support groups, and restricted work hours.^{9,10}

WAY FORWARDED

Internship acts as a medium to gear up the medical graduates with relevant clinical skills and knowledge for their professional careers. The internship program of Nepal is well designed with adequate postings in major departments serving to expose the interns to a wide variety of clinic situations. However, the vague job description by the university has led the hospitals to increase the workload of the interns for unreasonable pay. Moreover, the mental health of interns during this difficult time has also been overlooked which needs to be taken into account by the policymakers.

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