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Philip M. Yam
New York Medical College

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Med Student Fitness: A Survey on Exercise Habits during Medical Education

Philip M. Yam

Introduction

Attaining the knowledge to become a physician is a tremendous task. With such busy schedules, medical students may not find the time to exercise regularly. Beyond the conflicts of time, the stress involved in meeting the new responsibilities of becoming a physician may adversely affect how much exercise students are getting.

The purpose of this survey was to gain a quantitative understanding of the exercise habits of medical students; to learn how those habits were affected by gender, age, and year of program; and to discuss medical students' ability to maintain the exercise patterns for a healthy lifestyle as suggested by the American Medical Association (AMA).

Methods

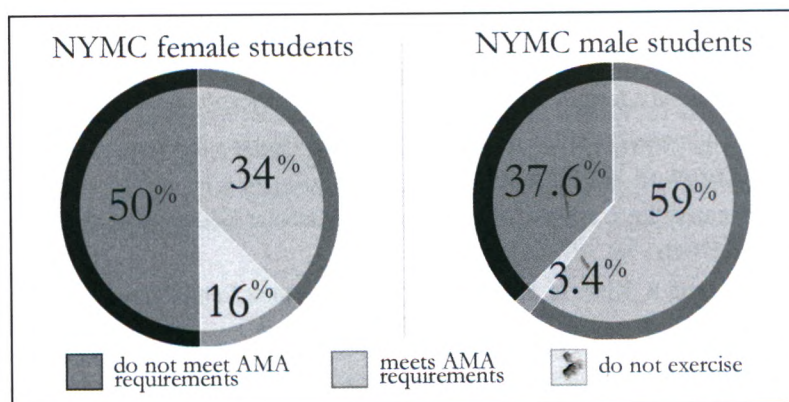
An email questionnaire was sent in the fall of 2008 to current medical students of all class years at the New York Medical College asking for: Gender? Age? Medical school year? How many times do you perform cardio exercises of at least 20 minutes each week? How many weightlifting exercises do you perform each week? The question of age was to be answered in categorical values such as 20-22, 23-26, and 27+ due to the nature of the email survey.

Results

Of the 128 total responses received (~16% response rate), 55% were female. 32 1st year, 69 2nd year, 11 3rd year, and 16 4th year students responded to the survey. 14 students from ages 19-22, 93 from ages 23-26, and 21 from ages 27+ responded.

Females and males both performed an average of 2.6 cardio workouts per week, but males showed a higher rate of weightlifting per week at 2.5 workouts per week versus females at 1.0 workout per week. Students who performed at least 1 weightlifting workout included 81% of males and 41% of females.

The amount of weightlifting varied little by class year. The 2nd year students performed the most cardio workouts at 2.9 per week, and the 3rd year students performed the least cardio workouts at 1.2 per week. The 1st and 4th years were intermediate.



Students those who were 19-22 worked out the least with 2.3 cardio and 1.7 weightlifting workouts per week compared to 2.7 cardio/1.7 weights for ages 23-26 and 2.6 cardio/1.6 weights for ages 27+.

Students who responded that they did not work out at all included 3.4% of males and 16% of females. Students who maintained the AMA suggestions of 30-60 minute exercises at least 5 days per week included 24/70 (34%) of females and 34/58 (59%) of males when counting the 20 minute cardio and weightlifting workouts as one 30-60 minute workout.¹ The group to meet the suggestions the least were 3rd year females at 1/7 (14%).

Discussion

Medical students have many reasons to exercise such as improved health, enjoyment, and stress relief, but other indirect benefits do exist. Lobelo et al. found that physicians who themselves performed physical activities were more likely to provide exercise and diet counseling to their patients.² Benefiting oneself as a caregiver provides downstream advantages to patients.

From the weightlifting results, there was a large discrepancy between females and males. One might suggest that males lifted weights for the benefit of improved muscle tone and mass, which may have been the reason driving away female students. In responding to the survey, one female added a comment stating that lifting weights enlarged her arms and shoulders, which was unattractive. Further investigations would be needed to determine if this opinion is typical of other female medical students.

Comparing the class years, the 2nd year medical students were able to perform more cardio workouts than the 1st year students. This result may be due to 2nd year medical students being more adjusted to the demanding schedules of medical school. The 3rd year students performed the least cardio exercises, which may have been related to the 3rd year being the first full time clinical setting for students. Another contributor may have been due to the 3rd year course credits and their affects on GPA being worth double compared the 1st and 2nd year courses.

Considering this, third year program directors may find it useful to identify the specific stresses or challenges that students face which keep them from exercising regularly. Another option includes creating a new course with the purpose of teaching better exercise habits. At the United Arab Emirates University, Barss et al. found that instituting a 1st year "lifestyles" course into the medical education improved students' history taking skills, eating habits, and exercise habits.³

Conclusion

The AMA suggests that in order to maintain or improve one's health, one needs to exercise 30-60 minutes at least 5 days per week. Since only 45% of New York Medical College students were able to meet this suggestion, it is clear that more emphasis on student health is needed. While the majority of students may need to visit the gym more often, the large discrepancy between females (34%) and males (59%) suggests that female students may benefit largely from performing a mixture of cardio and weightlifting exercises on a weekly basis. There may also be value in improving student health education for both the students themselves and their future patients.

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