

What is the nature of uncertainty confronting newly practising doctors?

Richard Conn, Hannah Gillespie and Tim Dornan



Centre for Medical Education

“Competent but unprepared new graduates are sitting ducks for psychosocial harm”¹

BACKGROUND

- New doctors face uncertainty daily, threatening their mental health²
- Uncertainty has been attributed to lack of knowledge and moral challenges³
- But to really understand uncertainty 'on-the-ground' requires in-depth study into practice

AIM

To determine how education can best respond to uncertainty, this research asked 'what is the nature of uncertainty confronting foundation trainees?'

METHODS

- Carried out within the context of the MITS/AW educational initiative
- Reflexive thematic analysis of records of 243 case-based discussions between interns and facilitators
- Focused on self-selected challenging experiences of prescribing insulin

RESULTS

“Even when Foundation Trainees ask for help, if others don't know the answer, the trainee is left making the decision on how to prescribe or not prescribe insulin” [CBD 78]

Two main types of uncertainty faced foundation trainees:

- 'Clinical uncertainty' arose from complexity of disease, unpredictable situations, not knowing how to involve patients and the lack of clear 'right answers'
- 'Social uncertainty' arose from the challenges of negotiating interactions with colleagues, such as dealing with pressure from nurses or asking for help from unsupportive colleagues

In response, trainees experienced strong emotions, especially worry, anxiety and fear.

DISCUSSION

- Uncertainty is an inevitable consequence of clinically and socially complex workplaces
- Learning to 'tolerate uncertainty' is only one part of the solution; educators must look to interventions that help trainees navigate complex situations and positively impact structural and cultural problems⁴

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