

Short Communication

The future of dermatology in Pakistan: Is it destined to be considered a sub specialty of internal medicine forever?

Dear Editor in chief,

“To be or not to be, that is the question.” This Shakespearean quote has been a cause of much debate among philosophers and common man alike since it was transferred from the canvas of the great playwright’s mind onto the consciousness of the audiences a few centuries back. The existential implications of this statement have haunted the mind of its readers for a long time and the statement has been used as a basis for various religious, spiritual, philosophical and worldly arguments. By applying this question to the existence of the field of dermatology in our country, we try to explore what is the place of dermatology in the health sector of the country and what does it mean ‘to be’ a practitioner or student of dermatology in Pakistan.

Dermatology has often been relegated to being a young offspring of the Patriarch that is Internal Medicine. While the world is debating how essential the dermatologists are for improving the quality of the general practice of medicine, dermatology is often dismissed as being merely a sub-specialty of internal medicine in Pakistan. This undermines the disease load of skin related disorders and the burgeoning demand of services provided by dermatology clinics.¹ Part of the blame also lies on the ever-increasing number of ‘dermatologists’ offering expensive cosmetic and aesthetic procedures while holding not more than a diploma in procedural dermatology. While cosmetic dermatology is an internationally recognized subspecialty of

dermatology, the use of the term ‘dermatologist’ by general practitioners barely trained in the field of dermatology makes it all the more difficult for the policy makers to recognize dermatology as a separate and multifaceted medical field with a potential to transform the physical and mental health of a significant proportion of the country’s population.^{2,3}

Dermatology is being recognized globally as an essential field and there exist separate pathways for application in residency programs.⁴ Whereas in Pakistan, there seems to be a regression with regards to the development of a comprehensive dermatology training programs for the aspiring dermatologists. The pathway to becoming a dermatologist has become more arduous over the past decade and the residents are now required to undergo a mandatory 2-year training in internal medicine and pass an exam irrelevant to their eventual field (Intermediate Module) before they can join their respective department. If one adds the challenge of acquiring a residency spot in this highly competitive field through Punjab Residency Program, it becomes clear that the time period spent in rural health centers acquiring sufficient experience necessary to get a spot in a public program does nothing to advance the professional career of a future dermatology resident.

Ophthalmology and otolaryngology are two perfect examples of the right choices made by the policy-makers. These fields have diverged from general surgery and now allow the residents to apply directly into the fields after

Table 1 Suggestions for the adoption of the best training system for Pakistani dermatology residents.

Number	Suggestion
1.	Senior dermatologists across the country should highlight their reservations (or approval) regarding the current system and convey them to the decision-making authorities.
2.	Qualitative as well as quantitative analyses need to be carried out in order to compare the different systems of training across the world with the system currently in place in our country.
3.	Junior doctors need to be asked about their experiences and quality improvement surveys should be conducted across the country.

passing their respective FCPS-1 exams. The residents in these fields join their respective departments and complete short rotations in relevant fields of surgery during the course of their training periods. The upper echelons of the health policy-makers need to realize that as an ophthalmology resident need not spend more than a few months learning the incision site for appendectomy or memorizing the nuances of abdominal closure techniques after cholecystectomy, a dermatology resident too has nothing to gain by spending years dealing with medical emergencies or managing patients with medical issues like stroke and diabetic ketoacidosis which have too little, if any, relevance to the patients they have to deal in the future. Moreover, the mandatory house job rotation in medicine already sensitizes the future dermatologists to an overview of the examination of different organ systems and a well-planned strategy of internal medicine rotations, instead of this mandatory 2-year residency, might prove much more beneficial in improving the quality and quantity of education received by residents during their dermatology trainings. Some suggestions for the adoption of the best training system for Pakistani dermatology residents is given in **Table 1**.

Dermatology is an exceptional field with a unique philosophy and objectives as compared to other fields of medicine⁵. While internal medicine helps to save the life of patient, dermatology aims to help its patients achieve self-actualization and improve the mental health of the patients too. The introduction of aesthetics and cosmetic dermatology adds further

dimensions to this amazing field and if used conscientiously, they have a potential to enhance the living standards of human beings worldwide. It is the responsibility of senior doctors to promote dermatology as an essential field and make efforts to help policy-makers recognize the importance of the of dermatology through statistics and meaningful arguments. Dermatology should be an essential part of medical school curriculum in order to help medical students recognize the prevalence and social as well as financial impact of skin disorders in our setup⁶. This is important so that the field of dermatology can “be” (in the most comprehensive philosophical sense of the word), the field it has the potential to be and finally the emancipation of this wonderful field from internal medicine can be complete.

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