Integrative Medicine in Primary Care Residency: Strategic and Successful

Incorporating integrative medicine education into primary care residency training is strategically advancing the movement toward whole health in mainstream medicine to meet an increasing public demand for comprehensive whole health care. Educators and administrators leading this effort are addressing challenges with well-researched curricula and implementation projects—with program success worth sharing and replicating. Integrative Medicine in Residency (IMR) is one of the most consistently prolific among these, with a total of 107 locations in the U.S., Canada, and Taiwan.

Initially tested in eight pilot sites, IMR is a 200-hour competency-based, interactive, online curriculum in integrative medicine designed for incorporation into primary care residency education. Mari A. Ricker, MD, is director of the IMR program launched in 2009 by the Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine.

“IMR serves as a singularly effective model for incorporating IM topics currently not included in conventional medical education,” says Dr. Ricker. “It’s a profound impact because residency training is the point in a physician’s career path that shapes patient care behavior most clearly and influences whole health care perspective for the long term.”

More than 2000 physicians in family medicine, pediatrics, internal medicine, psychiatry, PNI&R, obstetrics & gynecology, and preventive medicine-residency programs have completed the IMR curriculum. The curriculum is divided into seven core content subjects, including (1) physician well-being, (2) prevention and wellness, (3) tools in integrative medicine, (4) pediatrics, (5) acute care, (6) women’s health, and (7) chronic illness. Within this foundation, every resident is exposed to content in nutrition, herbs & supplements, vitamins & minerals, as well as mind-body medicine and spirituality. Illness-specific content supports the residents as appropriate in their areas of concentration and interest, i.e., diabetes, heart disease, pain care, etc.

Integrative Medicine education should begin in medical school, but I believe including it in residency training is a higher priority. In its residency training, attitudes and behaviors of physicians are formed. This is most effective using an organized, elective rotation, or courses that can be included in a track. All residents have access to the web-based curriculum at any time. The courses are also available for faculty development.

Todd Kitchens, DO, director of integrative medicine at Central Maine Healthcare since 2011, is very familiar with the IMR program, having started as a resident when it was offered as an option. In the Maine program, each resident is required to complete at least 50 hours of the IMR curriculum to graduate. Still, in the IMR program, a resident requires 200 hours of coursework to complete the IMR curriculum. In the Maine program, each resident is required to complete at least 50 hours of the IMR curriculum to graduate. Still, in the IMR program, a resident requires 200 hours of coursework to complete the IMR curriculum.

“From my perspective, the IMR curriculum provides a really good overview of the standard medical approaches to care while opening the residents to other ways of thinking, enhancing the care they provide,” says Dr. Kitchens. “Organically, the integrative medicine approach begins to permeate their everyday practice and decisions with patients.”

Central Maine is 100% supportive of the IMR program, making it possible for every resident to participate in the IMR curriculum without interfering with their daily practice. The IMR curriculum is divided into seven core content subjects, including (1) physician well-being, (2) prevention and wellness, (3) tools in integrative medicine, (4) pediatrics, (5) acute care, (6) women’s health, and (7) chronic illness. Within this foundation, every resident is exposed to content in nutrition, herbs & supplements, vitamins & minerals, as well as mind-body medicine and spirituality. Illness-specific content supports the residents as appropriate in their areas of concentration and interest, i.e., diabetes, heart disease, pain care, etc.

Central Maine and other institutions have selected this track.

Starting an IM Residency Program at your Institution

1. Institutional leadership support is critical. Start by talking to your residency program director to determine interest and support. Identify potential key faculty who may serve as an IMR curriculum site leader and whether they may want the IMR curriculum. The IMR team can assist with this.

2. Consider the integration plan you are intending to include in your residency program to determine whether the IMR program can fit into your residency program. The IMR program includes introducing residents to the curriculum with an assessment and online profile, a schedule of 10-15 webinars per year, and 30 hour self-study course on nutrition, herbs & supplements, vitamins & minerals, acupuncture, yoga, and meditation. The IMR program is designed to include faculty development, practice and curriculum updates, and to be used for ancillary support activities (i.e., visit to local whole foods store to read labels on supplements, yoga and meditation sessions, etc.). 3. Build time for your site leader to connect with other site leaders monthly and during the annual IMR retreat.

RESOURCES

• Dr. Mari Ricker: Integrative Medicine in Residency: Developing Competency Through Online Curriculum Training

• Mari A. Ricker, MD, Integrative Medicine in Residency: A Highlight of My Year, Integrative Medicine, 3(1), 3-6 (2011).

• Dr. Ricker looks forward each year to the IMR Faculty Development Conference, supported with grant and foundation funding to encourage every site leader to participate. “We build this gathering as a retreat weekend, and it has become the highlight of my year, providing faculty development, practice and curriculum updates while learning from each other, supporting each other in programs that truly advance integrative medicine and health.”

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