

Addressing Language Barriers Through Medical Education

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Language barriers between patients and physicians remain a critical obstacle to equitable healthcare delivery. With a rapidly expanding Hispanic population in Indianapolis, local healthcare providers must adapt to meet the needs of primary Spanish speakers. Meeting patients where they are creates a clinical environment built on trust, comfort, and mutual understanding. By proactively addressing these communication gaps through medical education, future physicians can dismantle the systemic barriers that prevent patients from receiving high-quality, comprehensive care. Utilizing the standardized curriculum created by the National Association of Medical Spanish (NAMS), MU-WCOM has set out to achieve this goal. Over the past two years, MU-WCOM's 2.5-credit-hour

Spanish elective offered to fourth year medical students has demonstrated success in instilling confidence and building students' clinical vocabulary. Pre- and post-course surveys from 2024 highlight this impact as there was a 44% increase in students who felt comfortable with completing simple, problem-focused patient interviews in Spanish, and a 60% increase in those comfortable managing in-depth, multi-system problem focused patient interviews. Furthermore, by the conclusion of the course, 100% of students agreed that they could recognize how cultural beliefs affect a patient's understanding of their health and future treatment. Building on this success, the course is planned to be spread out over the second to fourth years of medical school to encourage long-term growth, exposure, and confidence among participating students as they enter residency.

As future DOs, the commitment to treating the whole person is deeply embedded in our philosophy. While hands-on modalities like Osteopathic Manipulative Treatment allow us to address physical symptoms, effective communication is what allows us to understand the patient as a whole. In this way, the medical Spanish curriculum at MU-WCOM does not just teach language; it exemplifies osteopathic principles in action. By equipping students to bridge language and cultural barriers, this training prepares future DOs to offer Spanish-speaking patients the deeply comprehensive and empathetic care that the osteopathic philosophy champions.