

The Peer Assisted Learning Scheme

Providing opportunities to transition from student to tutor

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Background

One of the outcomes of *Tomorrow's Doctors 2009*¹, the General Medical Council's guiding document for medical schools that sets the standards required of students in order to graduate, requires the doctor as a professional to be able to reflect, learn and teach others. Outcome 21f states that a doctor is required to function effectively as a mentor and teacher. However the opportunities for an undergraduate to gain experience of teaching are limited. Peer tutoring affords the participating undergraduate medic this opportunity to transition from a student to a tutor. Concerns have also been raised within the post-graduate community that the anatomy knowledge possessed by a medical student does not sufficiently prepare them for the role of a junior doctor². Evidence suggests that peer teaching may improve students' understanding of anatomy, but the impact of peer teaching on the peer tutor's confidence with anatomical knowledge remains a little investigated topic.

Methods

We introduced a pilot of PALS (Peer Assisted Learning Scheme) into practical anatomy classes in the MBChB course at Aberdeen University. 25 final year medical students were recruited to act as peer-tutors in classes for Year 2 and Year 3 medical students. Existing teaching staff remained in class and a maximum of two tutors per class acted as an additional resource. Peer-tutors' confidence with anatomical knowledge was assessed through two questionnaires, completed before and after the PALS sessions.



Final Year medical student (in green lab coat) peer tutoring Year 2 medical students

Results

12 peer tutors delivered 1 two- hour session, 11 delivered 2 sessions and 2 delivered more than 3 sessions. On average, they devoted between 1 – 2 hours preparing for a session and delivered 1 – 2 two- hour sessions each. The number of peer tutors feeling confident in delivering a teaching session to their junior peers rose from 15/25 (60%) before the session to 25/25 (100% after the session). The number feeling confident in delivering an anatomy teaching session rose from 24% (6/25) before to 68% (17/25) after the session. Similarly, the number who felt that their anatomy knowledge was adequate for the Foundation Programme rose from 44% (11/25) before to 68% (17/25) after. Almost all students (21/25: 80%) felt that preparing for the PALS sessions gave them a deeper understanding of anatomical concepts.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the College Ethical Review Board

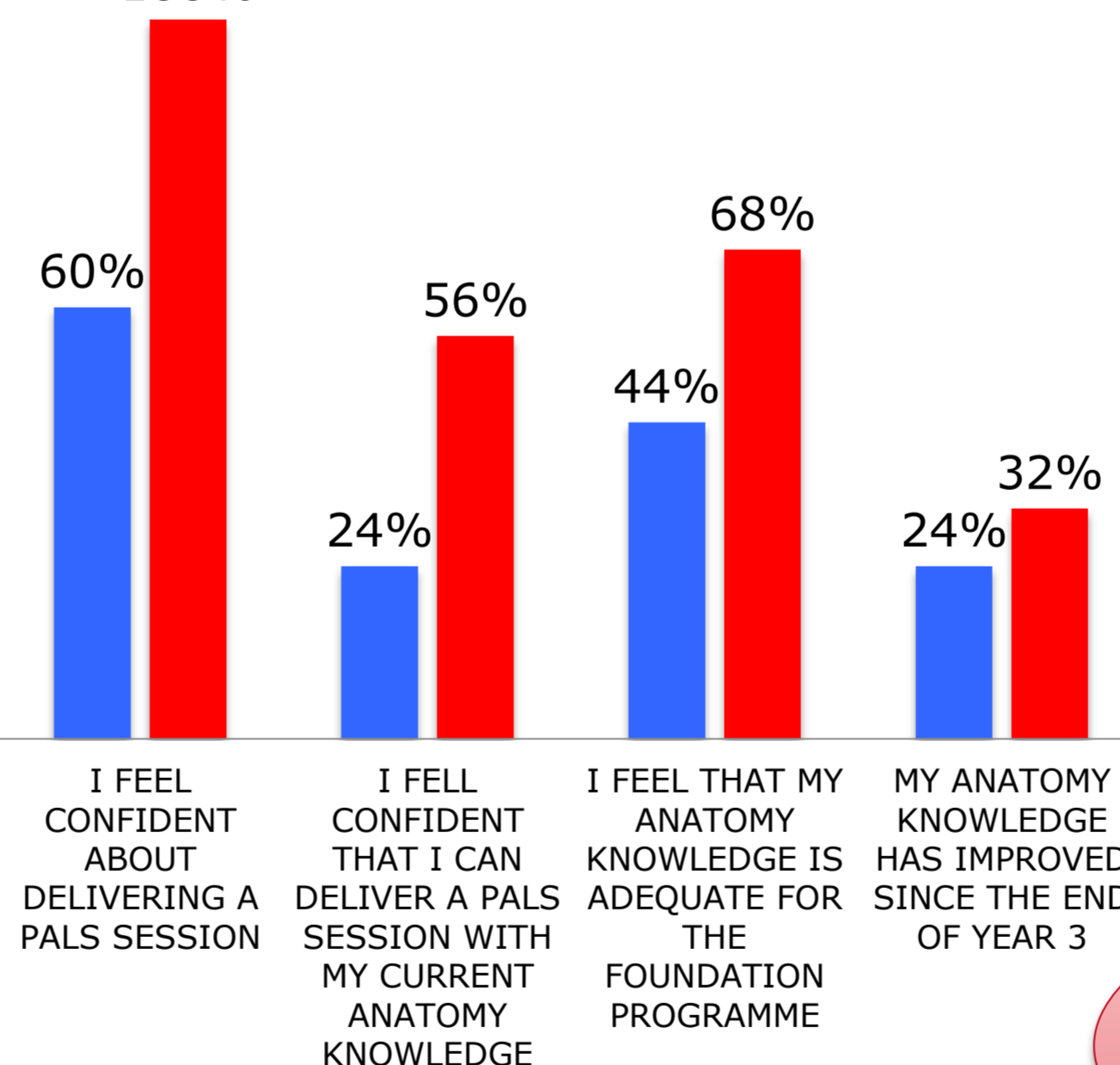
Going back to study anatomy having had more clinical experience made it more relevant.

The opportunity to engage in teaching in a formal capacity especially with senior support has made me more confident about teaching in my future career.

Selected comments from peer tutor

AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE BEFORE

AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE AFTER



Comparison of peer tutor responses before and after the teaching session

Enjoyed the session. Good teaching experience. Very useful. I would definitely recommend it to a friend. Certificate good for CV.

Many students quizzed me on omentum/ mesentery etc. I really had to know more in-depth than I had known for 3rd year.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that making the transition from a student to a peer tutor led to significant gains in: anatomical knowledge, concepts and confidence in delivering them following the peer-teaching sessions. The data here supports the often (mis-)quoted, view of the Roman philosopher Seneca that "by teaching we are learning", which is the mainstay of the peer-led teaching approach. It is particularly relevant in this context, as it shows a simple way in which to redress the perceived lack of anatomical knowledge in junior doctors, by providing opportunities for peer teaching in the pre-clinical course, which they would traditionally, no longer have access to. It is clear from both our studies and those of others³ that there would be simultaneous gains for those being taught.

References:

1. General Medical Council (2009). "Tomorrow's Doctors." GMC. London. Retrieved 23rd March, 2015, from http://www.gmc-uk.org/education/undergraduate/tomorrows_doctors_2009.asp.
2. Waterston SW, Stewart IJ. Survey of clinicians' attitudes to the anatomical teaching and knowledge of medical students. *Clin Anat* 2005;18:380- 4
3. Evans D, Cuffe T. Near-Peer Teaching in Anatomy: An Approach for Deeper Learning. *Anatomical Sciences Education* 2009;2:227-233