In Asia, many doctors are reluctant to manage patients’ psychological problems and remain skeptical towards its effectiveness. One reason for this is inadequate undergraduate exposure and subsequent low priority for developing such skills. In 2007, a six-hour program was introduced to expose students to counseling in primary care.

**Course description**

The program was composed of:
1. Seminar on medically unexplained symptoms and techniques which can be used in routine practice for the management of psychological problems including reattribution technique, relaxation exercises, activity planning, structured problem solving.
2. Observation of psychotherapy session (being conducted by a family physician trained in psychotherapy) through a one-way mirror followed by small group discussion
3. PBL case on somatisation and depression with opportunity to role play the reattribution technique and to use the genogram as a tool to assess psycho-social history

**Student survey**

In 2008, a pre and post course questionnaire was performed on students undergoing this program to assess students knowledge, attitudes and willingness towards counseling. We found that our students had positive attitudes towards counseling and that most believed that counseling should be core curriculum. Our program was effective in improving the students’ skills and knowledge but did not change their perceptions regarding incorporating counseling into future practice.

**Focus group interviews**

From January-July 2009, focus group interviews were conducted on students at the end of their Family Medicine Clerkship to determine why students felt that counseling was not effective or feasible in the HK primary care setting, and to discover what sort of educational experience might help to improve their attitudes.

Students expressed that as a result of the clerkship, they had developed a greater awareness of how prevalent psychological problems were in primary care and now realized that many patients suffered from undetected psychological distress. They also felt that they were now better able to identify these problems.

**Take Home Message**

Introducing counseling into the undergraduate medical curriculum was considered important by students and was shown to enhance their knowledge and skills. Exposure to psychological approaches during a consultation increased the students’ awareness regarding the high levels of undetected psychological distress in patients, and that there were measures available to help uncover these problems. This program was not able to significantly change the attitudes of the students towards the management of patients with psychological problems. Issues regarding students’ perception of the role of a doctor, lack of confidence, poor feasibility and beliefs regarding current standards of care need to be addressed before barriers to providing psychological care can be overcome. The students believed that greater exposure to seeing patients with psychological problems along with better role-modeling from their teachers, and a change in societal attitudes regarding the role of the doctor was required before their attitudes would be significantly changed.