

Addressing Health Inequities Through Social Accountability: A Compulsory Pathway to Universal Health Coverage — Case of The Faculty of Medicine Ibn El Jazzar of The University of Sousse, Tunisia

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Abstract

The Ibn El Jazzar Faculty of Medicine of the University of Sousse (FMSo), created in 1974, serves a population of 2.2 million inhabitants and has trained approximately 5800 students. As the first Tunisian medical school with a community orientation, it aims to train doctors who are committed to primary health care and sensitive to the needs of the population. It has adopted the Global Consensus on Social Accountability (SA) of medical faculties and is a founding member of the International Francophone Network for Social Responsibility in Health (RIFRESS). It is involved in international research projects on Social Accountability, such as that of the International Social Accountability and Accreditation Steering Committee (ISAASC).

Strategy, Outputs, and Conclusion

The Vision 2020 Strategic Orientation Plan, called “Let's think together about the future of medical training,” has highlighted the faculty's efforts to integrate into its regional environment and meet the health needs of the local population. It led to a reform of studies to integrate the principles of SA, focusing on professional skills and adapted training programs. The strategy aims to address the following challenges:

1. Train doctors capable of understanding and acting on the social determinants of health;
2. Conduct research that meets the needs of underserved populations;
3. Provide quality clinical services accessible to all; and
4. Collaborate with diverse actors (constituents) to promote health and equity.

Since then, it has embarked on an in-depth reform process to guide (1) the training it provides, (2) the research it conducts, and (3) the services it offers, all towards addressing the main health problems the region served by the faculty.

FMSo is committed to promoting health and health equity by integrating social responsibility into all its activities. This commitment is essential to respond to the challenges of the Tunisian health system and improve the health of the population. Expected impacts include:

- Improving the skills of future doctors in terms of SA.
- Strengthening of the Tunisian health system.
- Contribution to sustainable development goals in health.

Introduction

The social responsibility of medical schools is a concept that revolves around the commitment of medical institutions to improving not only the training of their students but also the health of society as a whole. The Faculty of Medicine of Sousse (FMSo) in Tunisia is an outstanding example of how this concept is put into practice. Founded in 1974, the FMS has integrated social responsibility into its educational, research, and community service missions from the outset. This case study examines how the FMS embodies the principles of social responsibility through its various initiatives and collaborations.

1. Training Competent and Ethical Doctors

The FMS places a strong emphasis on training competent and ethical physicians. From the very first year, students are immersed in community placements, and their training culminates in a compulsory internship in primary care. This educational pathway is designed to develop solid clinical skills as well as a deep understanding of the health needs of the population. In addition, the creation of a Medical Simulation Center enables students to train under realistic conditions, strengthening their clinical preparation and their ability to respond effectively to patients' needs.

2. Revision of the Medical Curriculum

Implementation of the reform where family medicine takes its place at the graduate school level. The curriculum is characterized by learning focused on people's needs, a humanistic approach to learning, and learning that fosters autonomy and skills development based on the integrated systems approach.

3. Responding to Community Needs

The FMSo has adopted a community-oriented approach since its inception. The first thesis defended by the faculty was titled "Identifying the health needs of the Ksar Héhal community," and it bears witness to this commitment. The faculty continues to focus on local needs by integrating community internships and encouraging research projects focused on regional health issues. This orientation enables the FMS to train doctors who are not only technically competent but also deeply committed to improving the health of their communities.

4. Promoting Useful Research

The FMSo is actively involved in research that responds directly to the needs of the population. The faculty is home to a number of research facilities, including centers and laboratories specializing in the prevention of non-communicable diseases, cancer treatment, mental health, and the quality of obstetric care. These research initiatives aim to develop practical, effective solutions to local and global health problems.

5. Collaboration with Healthcare Constituents

The FMSo maintains strong collaborations with various healthcare players, both nationally and internationally. In Tunisia, it works in partnership with three university hospital centers

and several regional hospitals, as well as with a network of basic health centers and doctors' practices covering a wide region. Internationally, it works closely with the Montreal Faculty of Medicine and several French faculties. These collaborations enable the sharing of knowledge, resources, and best practices, strengthening the FMS's ability to respond to the health needs of the community.

6. Public Education and Awareness

FMSo plays a crucial role in education and public awareness through various initiatives. The Pedagogical Development Center, funded by the World Bank, aims to improve the quality of teaching. In addition, a Medical Pedagogy Certificate has been set up to encourage teachers to continually review and improve their teaching methods. These efforts are designed to ensure that future doctors receive high-quality training that meets international standards and the needs of society.

7. Research and Innovation

The faculty actively engages in applied research, with several centers and laboratories dedicated to crucial areas such as ambulatory medical practice, prevention of non-communicable diseases, mental health, and health system governance and management. These initiatives are essential for developing solutions adapted to the needs of the population.

8. Commitment to Health Equity

The FMSo is strongly committed to promoting health equity. It participates in the global consensus on the social responsibility of medical schools and is part of the Groupe Francophone dedicated to this cause. The faculty was recently selected by the International Social Accountability and Accreditation Steering Committee for a research grant on social responsibility. This commitment is reflected in the FMS's ongoing efforts to adapt its training to environmental changes and meet international health recommendations.

Conclusion

The faculty of medicine of the University of Sousse is an excellent example of how a medical institution can embody and strive toward the principles of social accountability. Through its efforts to train competent and ethical physicians, respond to community needs, promote useful research, collaborate with various healthcare constituents, educate and raise public awareness, and commit to health equity, the FMSo demonstrates a deep and abiding commitment to improving public health. Its journey and achievements offer an inspiring model for other medical schools around the world. Despite the commitment of Tunisian Institutions to the accreditation process, its full and effective integration into standards and enacted laws remains inadequate. In fact, to date, accreditation standards do not necessarily include explicit requirements for corporate SA. However, they may include aspects that may indirectly touch on SA. The integration of SA into Tunisian accreditation standards and legislation was a process in progress but not necessarily finalized. In addition, student admissions criteria are an aspect of social responsibility that depends on the legislation in force and on which the faculty will have to work.

In summary, Tunisia is engaged in an ongoing process to integrate SA into its accreditation standards and legislation, reflecting its commitment to promoting sustainable and ethical practices. However, there is still some way to go to achieve full and effective integration of SA into all aspects of the Tunisian accreditation agencies and legislation.

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