Student Perceptions of Two Preclinical Medical School Exam Feedback Approaches

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Background: In medical school, where learning an abundance of information in a short period of time is required, it is necessary that learners receive valuable feedback after summative assessments (i.e., unit exams). First-year medical students at Indiana University School of Medicine (IUSM) begin their education with a course titled Human Structure (HS), followed by Molecules to Cells and Tissues (MCT). Both courses provided different formats for exam feedback, resulting in anecdotal comments about preference and utility of feedback. This study uses qualitative research methods to examine IUSM-Bloomington students' perceptions of exam feedback formats with respect to their utility and applicability.

Methods: Five, second-year IUSM-Bloomington medical students participated in a focus group to discuss their utilization and perceived usefulness of HS and MCT exam feedback. A thematic analysis was used to interpret data from the focus group. This study was deemed exempt by the IU-IRB (19409).

Results: The thematic analysis revealed that students' discussions fell into three categories: logistics, utilization, and mentality. These categories were further broken into themes and subthemes, revealing 13 unique codes. Students spent a substantial amount of time discussing logistics of exam feedback. Barriers to utilization of exam feedback included a lack of information provided at the feedback sessions and a lack of time in the schedule available for feedback sessions. Students preferred MCT approach to exam feedback, however they recognized HS course logistics may prevent similar adoption. Students had small suggestions on how to improve feedback in both courses.

Conclusions/Implications: The data suggest students would benefit from small changes in how first-year medical school courses at IUSM provide exam feedback. Improvements could include extending the time of exam review sessions, incorporating a discussion on commonly missed exam concepts, providing answer explanations for incorrect and correct answers, and transitioning statewide reviews to be campus led.