

What can be done to prevent racist stereotypes and to increase diversity-sensitivity in medical education? – A new educational model curriculum: Vienna Postgraduate Program “Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care”

Türkan Akkaya-Kalayci, MD^{1,2*}, Christian Popow, MD^{2,3}, a.o. Prof., Zeliha Özlü-Erkilic, MSc, PhD^{1,2}, Thomas Wenzel, MD, a.o.Prof.⁴

¹Outpatient Clinic of Transcultural Psychiatry and Migration Induced Disorders in Childhood and Adolescence, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Medical University of Vienna; Währinger Gürtel 18-20; 1090 Vienna; Austria

²Postgraduate University Program Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care, Medical University of Vienna, Spitalgasse 23, 1090 Vienna, Austria

³Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; Medical University of Vienna; Währinger Gürtel 18-20; 1090 Vienna; Austria

⁴Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy; Medical University of Vienna; Währinger Gürtel 18-20; 1090 Vienna; Austria

*Corresponding author: Türkan Akkaya-Kalayci; Email: tuerkan.akkaya-kalayci@meduniwien.ac.at

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Abstract

Although equal access to health care is a basic human right, accomplishing this in reality is not easy. To reduce unequal access to medical care there is an urgent need of a special training for health care professionals, researchers, and administrators. Especially the newly rising wave of racism, including anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic and other intolerant concepts, such as homophobic attitudes, promoted in Europe, forces a change in medical education that considers the importance of diversity and non-discrimination. However, few models take up this consideration. Although some publications have already discussed this, most of them suggest only general considerations rather than specific implementation concepts. Still the training of health care professionals should comprise transcultural, person-centred, and gender-specific medicine, intersectionality, and diversity-sensitive health care to ensure the respect of diversity and equal access to health care for all groups. An interdisciplinary approach bringing together social, biological, and health care sciences can help to develop a better concept of health care that reflects the diversity of individuals. The postgraduate Master’s Curriculum “Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care” at the Medical University of Vienna follows these considerations. This program aims to diminish the inequalities and prejudices in the health care system and to raise cultural awareness by upgrading the transcultural communication skills of health care professionals.

The first part of this program contains four modules covering general topics of diversity care and one seminar on research methods. The second part consists of eight modules covering special issues addressing diversity care of patient groups with different religious, cultural background and lifestyles as well gender and one seminar focusing on implementation and application of research methods, scientific writing, statistical methods, and evaluation.

Between 2015-2017 this new educational model curriculum has been offered for the first time in this content and scope at the Medical University of Vienna, and participants evaluated it mostly as quite positive.

The present report delineates the development, implementation, feasibility, structure and experience with the Viennese postgraduate program focusing on transcultural medicine and diversity care. As such, training programs can be expected to have a positive impact on the health care system, and other institutions and universities should by example be encouraged to implement similar components in their curricula.

Keywords: Transcultural Medicine; Diversity Care; Transcultural Competence; Transcultural Communication Skills; Diversity and non-discrimination

Introduction

Equal access to health care has been defined as a basic human right [1]. Unfortunately reality shows that this cannot always easily be accomplished [2]. This has resurfaced in the important discussion about transcultural, person-centred, and gender-specific medicine [3-6], intersectionality [4], and diversity sensitive health care. This especially includes refugees and migrants, members of the LGBTQ community, and people excluded from the work force.

Transcultural, person-centered, gender-specific medicine, intersectionality, and diversity-sensitive care can be seen as overlapping subjects. A stronger focus on diversity is seen as increasingly important in public health, and especially in situations characterized by rapid social change, such as in pandemics [6]. This process is also guided by the understanding of the catastrophic consequences of public “health projects” guided by earlier politically motivated racist and pseudo-scientific models especially in Germany and the US. Amutah et al., 2021 [3] claimed that at least some of the destructive and unethical concepts from these periods are still propagated in present medical curricula and also in research. They listed 5 domains where this problem can be observed, including semantics, prevalence, and statistical data without context, race-based diagnostic bias, labelling race, and clinical guidelines understanding aspects of racial background in the context of psychopathology. As a conclusion to their comprehensive analysis, the authors give a number of recommendations and stress the importance of changes in medical curricula educating students for their future work [3]. “Race” is a scientifically not well-founded concept that frequently is misused in political discussions, and specifically in health care, education and practice. Violations of the right of equal access to health care may more easily be identified in the case of political prisoners or war victims, everyday discrimination, racist barriers, and unequal access to civil rights and medical care is often not equally obvious and will require special training for responsible health care professionals, researchers, and administrators. Public Health and Human Rights in this aspect are closely connected, and Merone et al., 2021 [5] have drawn attention to the risk to this process, caused by misguided political priorities. An interdisciplinary approach bringing together social, biological and health care science is further required to offer a better concept of health care that reflects the diversity of individuals.

In spite of the well-argued need for such a change in medical education, few models have been presented that take up these considerations especially in the European Union, although the importance of diversity and non-discrimination has been confirmed in other areas of interest [3]. It is obvious, that declarations, legislation, and statements of intent are insufficient to provide for substantial and sustained changes if these aspects are not embedded in the formation and education of

health care professionals. Ekstrand et al. 2016 [7] and others underlined the importance of intersectionality [4,8,9], discussed the importance of multiple personal experiences in modern multi-ethnic societies and drew attention to the important Association of American Medical Colleges framework on diversity (Diversity 3.0) [10-13]. The discussion has also recently been extended by a number of publications underlining the importance of this issue [14-16], although most authors offer only general considerations rather than specific implementation concepts.

This holds especially true for Austria, a country that is now more sensitive to the heritage of racism and intolerance shaped during the period of National Socialism. But still, some remaining legislation from this period, has not been updated to reflect the present and EU standards against discrimination. Furthermore, academic teachers and medical experts who grew up during this dark period exerted their strong influence on the presently active staff [17,18]. Jewish and critical staff displaced during the Nazi period have usually not been invited to remigrate post-war and therefore could not offer advice and counter this development [19-21]. The long term impact of totalitarian and racist propaganda should not be underestimated in this context and needs to be addressed in all areas including medical education, especially in Austria. The presently rising new wave of racism, including anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic and other intolerant concepts, such as homophobic attitudes, promoted in many European countries needs to be addressed in the training of health care professionals, including students from different professional backgrounds active in health care services.

The authors have therefore developed and implemented a comprehensive postgraduate Master's Curriculum, "*Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care*", at the Medical University of Vienna that follows considerations outlined also by Amutah et al., 2021 [3] and Ekstrand et al., 2016 [7] as outlined above. We chose a sustainable, comprehensive model ending with a mainstream academic Master's title rather than the frequently used "instant" approach with a few weekends and limited depth of penetration of subjects, which is unfortunately common in the field, and only adequate enough to raise awareness. We wish to provide adequate skills in all relevant aspects including evidence base, research, and experience in the field.

This postgraduate master's program, covering five semesters, intends to impart in a first step in-depth knowledge and cultural skills concerning the diversity of religious backgrounds and beliefs, including the differences in beliefs and practices in religious minorities. The courses do not only focus on social and health care and research on migrants/refugee patients, but also on the attitudes, lifestyles,

communication styles of other and especially marginalised groups such as on people with uncommon lifestyles, socially disadvantaged persons, or members of the LGBTQ community.

The aim of this program is to reduce inequalities and bias in the health care system, to increase the cultural awareness as well the transcultural competence and to improve transcultural communication skills of health care professionals. Furthermore, this program should help students to perceive their bias, stereotypes, and prejudices by increased self-reflection on the factors shaping their own perceptions and practices. Culture in our approach is not seen as a static but as a dynamic process, in which our norms and attitudes continuously change by our life experiences with other individuals, institutions, environmental and socio-economic circumstances [22].

To the best of our knowledge in the European area, the postgraduate Master's program "*Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care*" is the first and still unique comprehensive training program for health professionals focusing not only on transcultural or migrant health care, but also on diversity care in medicine and allied disciplines, to reduce inequalities in medical care and care in allied disciplines.

We assume that the program is even more relevant in the present COVID-19 pandemic because the above-mentioned disadvantaged groups might face more challenges with complex impact, including a higher rate of distress, anxiety, and difficulties in accessing health care.

The curriculum developed included a wider range of nearly all subjects relevant to diversity care of people with different religious and cultural background, as well different lifestyle and gender aspects.

We recruited several leading international experts from different fields as teachers for our courses. Embedded in the academic educational mainstream, the program concludes with a diploma of MSc (Master of Sciences for Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care) in accordance with Austrian law.

This master's program has two parts. The first part has four modules focusing on general topics of diversity care and one seminar addressing research methods:

The second part consists of eight modules covering, in greater detail, key issues in the diversity care of patient groups with different religious, cultural background and lifestyles and with different genders including membership in LGBTQ groups and one seminar on the practical implementation and application of research methods, scientific writing, statistical methods, and evaluation, to different concrete questions in this fields (Table 1).

Table 1: Topics of "*Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care*".

Modules	Topics of " <i>Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care</i> "
Part I	
Module 1	Introduction to Transcultural Medicine: Migration and Health, Concept of Culture and Diversity
Module 2	Families in migration
Module 3	Social and cultural dimensions of health and illness, transcultural competence
Module 4	Language and communication
Method Seminar I	Introduction to research methods; preparation of the master's thesis
Part II	
Module 5	Medical care and treatment of Muslim patients
Module 6	Medical care and treatment of Jewish patients
Module 7	Medical care and treatment of patients with Christian value orientation (Serbian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Coptic Christians etc.)
Module 8	Medical care and treatment of Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh patients
Module 9	Medical care and treatment of patients from China, South and Southeast Asia
Module 10	Medical care and treatment of African patients
Module 11	Medical care and treatment of people with a refugee background and irregular immigrants as well as for traumatized and socially disadvantaged people
Module 12	Conflicts and conflict management in an intercultural context
Method Seminar II	Implementation and application of research methods, scientific writing, statistical methods, and evaluation

Methods

Development, history, and implementation of the Program

For many years, the Medical University of Vienna has offered diverse postgraduate programs in various scientific fields. Since 1996 the Outpatient Clinic of Transcultural Psychiatry and Migration Induced Disorders in Childhood and Adolescence at this University offers seminars about transcultural aspects and diversity-care measures for experts working in the health care and psychosocial field. The feedback from the participants of these seminars generally indicated that these courses only provide a first insight into the subjects and more courses are required to cover all aspects of this field. Based on these feedbacks of the participants we developed a first curriculum of the postgraduate master's program "transcultural medicine and diversity care". Between 2013-2015 a scientific advisory board consisting of experts from different disciplines of medicine and gender studies, medical anthropologists, psychotherapists, psychologists, palliative care practitioners, nurses, pedagogues, theologians, and lawyers developed and structured the modules of the educational program. In addition, the recommendations as well the feedback of the course participants were analysed and played an important role in structuring the present Master's program. After the program was developed, the "Teaching Center", and the vice-rector for teaching, the department of Gender Mainstreaming und Diversity of the Medical University of Vienna evaluated the educational program. After the legal department of Medical University of Vienna also reviewed the program, a curriculum commission consisting of medical experts from different disciplines as well as medicine students assessed the program. After this, the senate of university professors conducted a broader and final evaluation of the Viennese postgraduate program, with a positive result. After this careful review process, the educational program was implemented as a postgraduate educational model at the Medical University of Vienna.

Since 2015 this Viennese Postgraduate Program "Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care" became consequently available for postgraduates, who want to expand their transcultural knowledge and competences. The university course lasts five semesters (including one semester for the master's thesis). The program in its present form is based on an interdisciplinary approach as it brings together social, biological, and healthcare sciences with an integrative approach. In order to raise transcultural awareness and competences, each patient is assessed individually in a context situation-dependent way to meet his/her/their special needs for providing optimal treatment, providing state-of-the-art person-centered health care. In teaching, a wider range of tools is applied including self-reflection exercises, excursions, preparation of topics for presentations, group discussions, case reports, role plays, and discussions, written reflections about the excursions to places of worship such as mosques, temples, synagogues, churches and to migrant organizations, NGOs working with refugees/migrants and marginalized groups e.g. homeless people. The present teaching time is adapted to respect existing professional obligations of the participants, and the teaching units are spaced to take place every 2-3 weeks, usually from Friday to Sunday and also include two major excursions to different countries with different local cultures and religious groups, each lasting 3-7 days. In the first part of the program, general transcultural and cross-cultural aspects, diversities as well similarities in all ethnicities and societies are presented and discussed with the participants. In the second part, more culture-specific and person-centred aspects are covered in greater detail. Religious faiths of migrants living in Austria such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism etc. are addressed, each in special modules.

The courses of "Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care" are addressed to graduates from the disciplines of human medicine, psychology, dentistry, biology, pharmacy, psychotherapy, health sciences, anthropology, sociology, pedagogy, communication sciences, law sciences and theology.

Evaluation of the program

A semi-structured evaluation is performed at the end of the educational program; to provide student feedback about the program, responding to the following questions:

How will you assess the program?

Response alternatives were:

- 1) Very satisfactory
- 2) Satisfactory
- 3) Moderately satisfactory
- 4) Dissatisfied
- 5) Very Dissatisfied

"What was good or not enough in the present educational program?"

"What should be changed/improved in the future by the educational program?"

As no similar educational program was available before, and the feedbacks from the graduates were seen as important to improve the program, the first course of the educational program was evaluated with a semi-structured questionnaire at the end of program.

Based on this student feedback, the present educational program has been restructured and revised substantially and the scope and number of seminars of the educational program have been noticeably extended. In the revised program, we added more excursions and seminars as well group discussions and additionally a third methodology seminar for supervision of the thesis, in which the students will get additional individual support for writing their thesis on top of support from their supervisor. Therefore, the very important academic European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) points that indicate the value of a curriculum in the revised program did rise to 120 ECTS credits from the earlier 98 ECTS credits.

Results

In 2015-2017, the postgraduate program "Transcultural Medicine and Diversity-Care" was offered for the first time at the Medical University of Vienna. In this first cycle of the educational program, a total of 19 people from different disciplines of medicine, psychology, psychotherapy, health sciences, anthropology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and orthoptics participated in the complete program. Participant age range was between 21-70 years, with various ethnic, cultural, and professional backgrounds. Like other university programs offered at the Medical University of Vienna, the present educational program was also evaluated by the students. The results of these evaluations show that the rating by the students in general indicated a mostly positive outcome.

The results of our internal evaluation of the educational model yielded that 9 students assessed the educational program in general as "very satisfactory" and that they gained extensive transcultural skills and competences to use in their clinical everyday life. Three students evaluated the present educational program as being "in general satisfactory" and indicated that in the future more exercises and excursions should be implemented to the educational program. Four of the students also described the educational program in general as "satisfactory".

They indicated that in the future more space should be given to seminars on care for marginalized groups such as LGBTQ members, sex workers etc. Only three students evaluated the present educational program as "moderately satisfactory" and indicated that the focus was more on medical aspects and consequently social issues were not sufficiently covered. These 3 students were from non-medical

professions, such as ergotherapy, orthoptics and cultural anthropology. In sum, the majority of the students assessed the educational program as “very satisfactory” and “satisfactory” and indicated that there are some improvements required, but none of the students reported they were “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the program.

While nine of the 19 students already finished their master’s thesis, three more students are close to finalizing, and seven students completed the educational program successfully, without yet writing their master’s thesis, as they primarily took part in the educational program in order to use the knowledge provided and competences in their daily working life. Feedback elicited from eleven students during the process of writing their master’s thesis indicated that more method seminars should be implemented to the educational program, as they had not received any research training with practical experience before, and this has been taken up for the future development of the program.

Discussion

The present article is a first report on our model, demonstrating the feasibility of integrating post-graduate education on diversity care in the health-care system curricula. It summarizes the structure and experience with the Viennese postgraduate program focusing on transcultural medicine and diversity care, which is unique and has been offered for the first time in this content and scope in Vienna between 2015-2017, originally providing for only 98 ECTS education points. The participants evaluated the first round of the program as quite satisfactory; therefore, we feel encouraged in proposing that further universities in other countries should take up the issue in their educational offers. Based on recommendations of the students who already finished this program successfully, we added a stronger focus on practical excursions and seminars as well group discussions, leading to an increase in academic EU points to 120 (ECTS).

A postgraduate master’s program, covering in our case 5 semesters, should impart first in-depth knowledge and cultural skills about religions and their different denominations as well as different lifestyles and communication styles of minority and marginalized groups, including migrants and refugee patients and their cultural and religious backgrounds, and on patients with uncommon life styles, socially disadvantaged persons, or members of the LGBTQ community.

As we mentioned in the introduction section, even though equal access to health care offers is a basic human right, it is not easy to ensure this in reality. The lack of diversity care in the health-care system often leads to prejudices, stereotypes, misunderstandings, misdiagnosis, and to incorrect treatments. Therefore, the aim of the Viennese postgraduate program is to improve the transcultural awareness and competences of the health care professionals by knowledge transfer, group discussions, as well self-reflection exercises in the courses. Migrants or people with different lifestyles or mindsets can expect to be treated in a more adequate way by experts with transcultural and diversity-care competences.

In the main medical program at the Medical University of Vienna, courses dealing with transcultural aspects are available only to a very limited degree. As the present educational model lasts five semesters and contains many seminars, excursions, reflection exercises, group discussions, and presentations, it, as any similar program, cannot be embedded in the main medical program in this scope, but must be taken at a postgraduate level. Therefore the Postgraduate Program “Transcultural Medicine and Diversity Care” is addressed to people working in the health-care system, who have contact with refugees/migrants or marginalized groups in their professional everyday life.

According to Statistic Austria 2021, the proportion of the migrant has noticeably increased over the past ten years. In 2020, almost a quarter (24.4%) of the general population had a migration background, as around 2.14 million migrants lived in Austria.

Therefore, especially people working in the health-care system are facing problems arising due to cultural and lingual varieties, which complicates the adequate treatment of refugees/migrants or even makes it impossible.

The aim of the present educational program is to prevent inequalities and prejudices in the health care system to provide adequate equal medical treatment for all living in Austria. To be able to reach this objective cultural awareness, transcultural competence of health care professionals has to increase. Therefore, specific objectives of this educational program are to increase scientific knowledge about different religious and cultural attitudes, transcultural skills, cultural awareness, transcultural competence, and transcultural communication skills in order to offer adequate diversity-care treatment. At the same time the postgraduate program aims to prevent religious and cultural simplifications as well stereotypes, which prohibit culture and language sensitive treatment in the health-care system and we propose this as a guiding principle for all similar programs that are urgently needed in an age of migration, not only in Austria.

Conclusions

Interest in the course has been substantial to this day, and awareness-raising measures can be seen as a part of the project strategy to promote diversity not only in the participants but also in the general and the academic public. The program achieved a positive media-echo contributing to raised awareness on our issues. Diverse medical journals such as the journal of the Medical Associations of Vienna and Austria, scientific journals of psychiatry and psychotherapy as well as the “Kurier”, a popular newspaper in Austria, reported about the Viennese Postgraduate Program.

Additionally, we have presented the Viennese postgraduate program at a total of 13 national and international congresses (six international and seven national congresses), which helped to gain applications from other countries, especially from Germany and Switzerland for the next round, which will start in October 2022.

The Medical associations of the nine federal states of Austria have invited us to present the Viennese postgraduate program; consequently we have presented the program in most federal states.

Although it was planned to start in 2020 with the new curriculum, updated as described, the educational program could not start due to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, as it includes many excursions, group work, group discussions etc., which would not be possible online. It is therefore expected to start again in October 2022 with 20 students.

While a number of authors have demonstrated and argued for diversity care and intersectionality in health care education, a few US organisations have started to edit guidelines on these issues [13] but specific curricula covering their implementation, especially in EU countries including Austria, have not been published as yet. The success of our curriculum, that reflects the recommendations outlined by Amutah et al., 2021 [3] and Ekstrand et al., 2016 [7] and other authors proves that such a training is feasible and may well be accepted by students of various professions. Participants were willing to pay a tuition fee in a country where medical education is usually free of charge, confirming the interest by professionals to take this special step. The successful completion rates confirm the keen interest of stakeholders and students. We are aware of the limitations of our present report, that, at present, data on the impact of our training course on the public health care system are not available. We would, however, like to encourage other institutions and universities to implement similar curricula in their training programs.

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