The Internal Medicine Subinternship—Now More Important than Ever

A Joint CDIM-APDIM Position Paper

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For decades, the internal medicine (IM) subinternship has served as a critical interface between undergraduate and graduate medical education. As such, the vast majority of U.S. medical schools offer this rotation to help students prepare for post-graduate training. Historically an experiential rotation, a formal curriculum with specific learning objectives was eventually developed for this course in 2002. Since then, graduate medical education (GME) has changed significantly with the regulation of duty hours, adoption of competency-based education, and development of training milestones and entrustable professional activities. In response to these and many other changes to residency training and medical practice, in 2010, the Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine (APDIM) surveyed its members—with input from the Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine (CDIM) Subinternship Task Force—to determine which core skills program directors expected from new medical school graduates. The results of that survey helped to inform a joint CDIM-APDIM committee's decision to re-evaluate the goals of the IM subinternship in an effort to enhance the transition from medical school to residency. This joint committee defined the minimum expectations of what constitutes an IM subinternship rotation, proposed recommended skills for IM subinterns, and discussed challenges and future directions for this crucial course.

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T he internal medicine (IM) subinternship is a longstanding pillar in undergraduate medical education (UME) that arose out of necessity in response to intern shortages during World War II, rather than a perceived educational need. This rotation for senior medical students to serve as acting interns was a logical extension of the "progressive graded"

responsibility" concept already in place for residency programs, and became widely adopted after the war. Since then, medical specialization evolved and changed residency education, which in turn gave rise to subinternships in other specialties. Although the IM subinternship has remained an integral component of medical education and is offered at most medical schools, it has largely been an experiential rotation without clearly defined curricular goals. In 1992, Federman was the first to specifically address the IM subinternship's role in the continuum of IM education. Subsequently, Fagan and colleagues outlined more specific recommendations regarding the IM subinternship structure and experience.

In 2002, the Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine (CDIM) Subinternship Task Force published its core curriculum for the IM subinternship. 5-7 This curriculum's specific objectives were based upon a needs assessment from IM residency program directors, subinternship directors, and interns.⁵ Since that publication, graduate medical education (GME) and medical practice have changed significantly with the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) regulations on duty hours and supervision; development of competency-based education, training, and evaluation; increased emphasis on transitions of care, patient safety, and quality improvement; and the widespread adoption of electronic health records (EHR). These changes have impacted clinical teaching and learning at the UME level. Duty-hour regulations have resulted in faculty and residents perceiving less time to teach students, reduced continuity of patient care, and decreased volume and variety of patient exposures for students. 8-13 Billing and medico-legal concerns have resulted in many institutions prohibiting students from using EHRs. 14

EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS RESPOND

Recognizing the changes to GME and their effects on UME, in 2010 the Association of Program Directors in Internal

Medicine (APDIM) surveyed its members about the IM subinternship. The survey items were developed with input from the CDIM Subinternship Task Force and included skills across several domains reflecting the current CDIM subinternship curriculum⁶ and primer. ¹⁵ Program directors ranked the skills, knowledge, and behaviors they believed were most important for new interns to possess. Those results 16 prompted a re-examination of the IM subinternship, particularly in the context of internship preparation. In July 2012, the Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine (AAIM) formed the joint CDIM-APDIM Committee on Transitions to Internship (CACTI), whose charge included updating the goals and objectives of the IM subinternship. More recently, the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has turned its attention to residency preparation with the publication of 13 core entrustable professional activities for entering residency (CEPAER) that define a core set of behaviors and skills expected of all medical school graduates.¹⁷ Capitalizing on the timely formation of CACTI and the AAMC's CEPAER, this paper aims to update the goals and objectives of the IM subinternship, mapping them to specific core EPAs to reflect the many changes to GME, while promoting a standardized language that bridges the transition between UME and GME.

MINIMUM EXPECTATIONS OF WHAT CONSTITUTES AN INTERNAL MEDICINE SUBINTERNSHIP ROTATION

Building on earlier work and the previously published CDIM subinternship curriculum,^{3,5–7} the new subinternship curriculum should:

- be competency-based
- be developmental, consolidating and refining the knowledge and skills acquired during third-year clerkships
- insure increased responsibility in the evaluation and management of acutely ill, hospitalized medical patients in directly supervised patient-care settings
- promote development of effective interprofessional teamwork and communication skills.

To achieve these goals, the subinternship must contain rigorous expectations that define:

- the setting and length of the clinical rotation
- level of supervision
- duty-hour regulations and clinical workload
- care transitions and cross-coverage responsibilities
- access to EHRs
- opportunity for evidence-based, high value care practice.

The IM subinternship must be an inpatient rotation that gives the subintern primary responsibility for providing care to medical patients. This experience may occur on the general medicine wards, medical intensive care unit (ICU), or a medicine sub-specialty service (e.g., cardiology, oncology, etc.), as long as the subintern is part of a team bearing *primary* responsibility for the care of its patients. To enable adequate and meaningful clinical exposure as well as optimal contact time with clinician-educators, the duration of an IM subinternship rotation should be a minimum of 4 weeks in length, mirroring the typical length of most residency program rotations.

Direct supervision throughout the rotation is essential, and the design of the medicine inpatient units and the nature of the hospital (e.g., academic or community-based) will determine the specific model. Teams may incorporate senior residents or involve direct supervision only by hospitalists or specialty attendings without any house staff. Ultimately, whichever model is used, an attending physician will have overarching responsibility for the supervised education of the subintern. Direct observation and feedback are the primary means for evaluating the subintern's clinical performance and his/her ability to integrate feedback into subsequent performance.

While strict duty-hour regulations do not exist for subinterns, it is expected that clinical workload and duty-hour limitations appropriate for resident-led teams be adhered to by the subintern. The number of continuous duty hours for a subintern can mirror that of an intern or that of an upper-level resident, depending on the specific nature of the rotation and team structure and the discretion of the subinternship course director. Whereas ACGME program requirements state that an IM intern must not be responsible for the ongoing care of more than ten patients, ¹⁸ there are no similar guidelines to inform decisions about the appropriate number of patients for whom a subintern assumes the primary caregiver role; the consensus of the CACTI Group is that providing ongoing care for three to five patients is ideal, with adjustments made based on the level of competence demonstrated by the subintern.

Important care transitions for hospitalized patients include admission, transfer between services, sign-outs between physicians, and discharge from the hospital. These care transitions leave patients especially vulnerable, and subinterns must actively participate in these critically important care transition activities to learn common patient safety principles and develop effective communication skills. In particular, discharge management provides rich opportunities for subinterns to work in multidisciplinary teams and learn to engage community resources during the discharge process. Likewise, subinterns should participate in cross-coverage roles similar to those of interns; this can include night and/or weekend work. The goal is to have subinterns develop skills in acute diagnostic and management strategies, and enhance their ability to recognize sick patients requiring higher levels of care. These cross-cover responsibilities, which may be assessed during the day or on night call depending upon the structure of the rotation, should be deliberately built into the clinical responsibility profile. It may be logistically unfeasible to build night-float roles for subinterns into a predominantly daytime subinternship rotation, so some institutions may need to create a separate required fourth-year night-float experience.

To fully engage as the principal patient caregiver, subinterns must be allowed full access to patients' medical records and be given the ability to document in these records and to write

Table 1. Recommended Skills for Subinterns with Corresponding IM Milestones and Core EPAs for Entering Residency (CEPAER)

Recommended Skill Set	APDIM Survey High Priority Skills	Curricular Milestone	Example Skill and Corresponding AAMC CEPAER
Recognizing sick vs. non-sick patients	Information management (prioritizing skills)	Acquire accurate and relevant histories from patients in an efficiently customized, prioritized, and hypothesis- driven fashion (PC)	Effectively and efficiently collects relevant historical data (EPA-1)
		Perform accurate physical examinations that are appropriately targeted to the patient's complaints and medical conditions.	Able to perform an appropriately targeted physical exam (EPA-1)
		Identify pertinent abnormalities (PC) Recognize situations which need urgent or emergent medical care, including life threatening conditions (PC)	Immediately seeks enhanced medical care for deteriorating patients (EPA-10)
		Understand the relevant pathophysiology and basic science for common medical conditions (MK)	Able to interpret changes in vital signs, signs and symptoms of potential cardiovascular or respiratory collapse (EPA-10)
	Coordinating care with other health care workers	Deliver appropriate, succinct, hypothesis-driven oral presentations (ICS)	Conveys a sense of urgency, asks questions of senior team members and other team members (EPA-6)
		Work effectively as a member within the interprofessional team to ensure safe patient care (SBP)	Notifies all team members of changes in patient's condition; involves ancillary staff in care of patient (EPA-9)
	Knowing when to seek assistance	Recognize when to seek additional guidance (PC) Recognize when it is necessary to advocate for individual patient	Knows when higher level of care is needed; recognizes when situations are beyond his/her own capabilities (EPA-10)
Time management skills	Organization, Prioritization,	needs (P) Respond promptly and appropriately	Answers phone calls and pages promptly
	and Time management	to clinical responsibilities, including but not limited to calls and pages (P) Ensure prompt completion of clinical, administrative, and curricular tasks (P) Carry out timely interactions with colleagues, patients and their	(EPA-9) Maintains organized checklists of daily patient care tasks (EPA-4 and EPA-5) Maintains organized schedule of rounding times, clinic start times, and conferences
		designated caregivers (P) Recognize and address personal, psychological, and physical limitations that may affect professional performance (P) Recognize the scope of his/her abilities	Maintains open channels of communication with peers and supervisors to enable optimal receptiveness to feedback about effective teamwork (EPA-9)
		and ask for supervision and assistance appropriately (P) Appreciate the variety of health care provider roles, including, but not limited to, consultants, therapists, nurses, home care workers, pharmacists,	Appropriately enlists timely assistance from team's social worker to facilitate discharge planning process (EPA-9)
Knowing when to ask for assistance (and from whom)	Knowing when to seek assistance	and social workers (SBP) Recognize when to seek additional guidance (PC)	Immediately call senior resident to come assist if patient clinically deteriorating (EPA-10) Asks colleague (intern, resident, attending, nurse, etc.) for help with completing an unfamiliar task (e.g., placing an IV, drawing labs, completing discharge paperwork, getting informed consent, etc.) (EPA-9) Enlists the help of senior resident or attending in cases where patient and/or family becomes upset about their care (EPA-9) Seeks oversight from a senior resident or attending for discussions about end-of-life, DNR, or withdrawal of care (EPA-9)

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Table 1. (continued)

Recommended Skill Set	APDIM Survey High Priority Skills	Curricular Milestone	Example Skill and Corresponding AAMC CEPAER
Communicating effectively within healthcare teams	Transition periods: Writing discharge/ transfer summaries	Provide legible, accurate, complete and timely written communication that is congruent with medical standards (ICS)	Generates a thorough discharge summary that effectively communicates the hospital course, the current plans, and follow-up for the patient (EPA-8)
	Providing a prioritized and organized verbal and written sign-out	Manage and coordinate care and care transitions across multiple delivery systems, including ambulatory, subacute, acute, rehabilitation and skilled nursing (SBP)	Communicates with past and future care providers to insure continuity of care (EPA-8)
	Oral presentations	Deliver appropriate, succinct, hypothesis- driven oral presentations (ICS)	Delivers accurate and focused bedside presentations (EPA-6)
	Requesting a specialty consultation	Request and provide consultative care (PC) Request consultative services in an effective manner (ICS)	Asks meaningful clinical questions that guide the input of consultants (EPA-9) Weighs consultant recommendations in order to effectively manage patient care
	Communicating in a culturally sensitive manner	Actively seek to understand patient differences and views and reflects this in respectful communication and shared decision-making with the patient and the healthcare team (ICS)	Quickly establishes therapeutic relationships with patients and caregivers from all different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds (EPA-9)
	Coordinating care with other health care workers including nurses and triage	Effectively communicate plan of care to all members of the health care team (ICS)	Engages in collaborative communication with all members of the team (EPA-9) Acts to facilitate collaboration with the team to enhance patient care (EPA-9)

Legend:

PC = Patient Care

MK = Medical Knowledge

P = Professionalism

SBP = Systems-Based Practice

ICS = Interpersonal Skills and Communication

EPA-1: Gather a history and perform a physical examination

EPA-2: Prioritize a differential diagnosis following a clinical encounter

EPA-3: Recommend and interpret common diagnostic and screening tests

EPA-4: Enter and discuss orders/prescriptions

EPA-5: Document a clinical encounter in the patient record

EPA-6: Provide an oral presentation of a clinical encounter

EPA-7: Form clinical questions and retrieve evidence to advance patient care

EPA-8: Give or receive a patient handover to transition care responsibility

EPA-9: Collaborate as a member of an interprofessional team

EPA-10: Recognize a patient requiring urgent or emergent care and initiate evaluation and management

EPA-11: Obtain informed consent for tests and/or procedures

EPA-12: Perform general procedures of a physician

EPA-13: Identify system failures and contribute to a culture of safety and improvement

orders with built-in mechanisms for physician co-signature before orders are implemented by the nursing staff. This level of engagement enables subinterns to demonstrate patient care ownership and provides them with valuable hands-on practice experience.

The IM subinternship provides ideal grounds for practical application of a medical school's evidence-based medicine curriculum, and this should be an objective of the subinternship with clearly defined opportunities for assessment. The IM subinternship curriculum should also incorporate education on quality and safety measures and understanding of high value care. ¹⁹

RECOMMENDED SKILLS FOR INTERNAL MEDICINE SUBINTERNS

Previous work showed that students from different schools do not enter internship with a 'standard' set of skills and that gaps exist between the skills new interns can perform and what is expected of them by program directors.²⁰ The IM subinternship is a well-suited rotation that can address many of the core skills that IM program directors would like their new interns to possess. Results from the 2010 survey of APDI M members provide the most recent core skills program directors expect from new medical school graduates. There was high uniformity among program directors' responses to this survey, which served as the starting point for the recommended set of skills that all students completing an IM subinternship should possess. The survey responses broadly defined four major skill sets: patient evaluation skills (e.g., recognizing sick patients), time management skills, knowing when to ask for assistance, and communicating effectively within healthcare teams. 16 Each of these broad skills and the associated items from the APDIM questionnaire can be linked to the published IM milestones²¹, most of the ACGME clinical competencies, and the AAMC's core EPAs for entering residency (CEPAER) (see Table 1). Additionally, example

behaviors or skills that would allow the subintern to demonstrate achievement of competence in each milestone are included to help operationalize the milestones. Many of these behaviors could be developed through caring for patients as a subintern, while others could potentially be accomplished through selective use of the training problems contained within the CDIM subinternship curriculum, which include common inpatient scenarios and cross-coverage situations. Using the IM milestones as a framework for competencies in the medicine subinternship facilitates bridging of the educational continuum from UME to GME and establishes greater uniformity in the education and evaluation of students.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The IM subinternship's brief yet pivotal role highlights some educational challenges of preparing 4th-year students for postgraduate training. Although academically and clinically rigorous, a typical subinternship is only 4 weeks in length and is usually taken early in the academic year to "audition" for residency programs, leaving the remainder of the year vulnerable to potential "decay" in knowledge and skills. These two issues argue strongly for medical schools to require more than one subinternship. Yet, increasing class sizes present logistical challenges to this proposal, both in terms of available training sites and numbers of prepared faculty, potentially decreasing the value of these subinternships.

Likewise, as health care systems move toward adopting EHRs, medical students' ability to document and write orders are at risk of becoming diminished, which may further lessen the rotation's educational value. ¹⁴ The Alliance for Clinical Education has published a statement providing guidance to medical educators on expectations for medical students documenting in EHRs. ²²

As the economic climate has prompted re-evaluation of the cost and duration of medical education, ²³, ²⁴ IM faculty should strive to offer flexibility and adapt the subinternship curriculum to current and future changes in medical education. While these new guidelines aim for closer alignment of subinternship and residency expectations, we recognize that any curricular reform may limit flexibility, and thus, we have left many suggested requirements adaptable to specific institutions and situations.

Despite these challenges, we must prepare graduating students to transition into GME. While other 4th-year courses, such as capstone courses, can contribute, 25 we believe that the subinternship, as defined in these guidelines, provides the most realistic preparation for patient care. We suggest that medical schools critically review their subinternship curriculum and construct "subintern milestones" that align with the AAMC's published CEPAER and program director expectations as outlined in Table 1. Likewise, the content of each school's subinternship curriculum and each student's attainment of competency in

each curricular element should be communicated to program directors, perhaps as part of the department chair's letter. ²⁶ This would allow program directors to anticipate experiential gaps and develop appropriate orientation activities for new interns accordingly.

CONCLUSION

The medicine subinternship is a cornerstone of the final year in medical school. GME has changed in terms of duty-hour regulations, milestones, EPAs, and competency-based education, with increasing emphasis on team work, quality improvement, and patient safety. Thus, the subinternship experience also must evolve to align with the new learning environment. Program director expectations of new interns provided a logical framework for these updated subinternship goals and objectives. Adopting clearly articulated curriculum guidelines across schools may help insure that starting residency, graduates possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for success in the next phase of their medical training.

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A full listing of the CACTI Group Membership is available electronically (see Appendix).

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