

Guidelines and procedures for physical examination of students by peers and tutors

Approved by: Undergraduate Medical Education Curriculum Committee

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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide a uniform approach to consent for physical examination of students by peers and tutors and to provide a clear procedure for negotiating adverse events.

Scope

This document applies to all students and faculty involved in the teaching and learning of clinical skills in the undergraduate medical curriculum. In this document the term “peers” refers to undergraduate medical students.

Guidelines

1. University of Toronto undergraduate medical students are expected to examine peers as part of their clinical skills training.
2. Students and tutors will be expected to examine bare limbs, abdomen and chest (anterior and posterior), and the head and neck.
3. Students and tutors will not be expected to examine exposed breasts, or the genitals or rectal area.
4. Students must provide verbal consent to be examined before each instance of physical examination.
5. Students may withdraw verbal consent to be examined at any time. Students are not required to disclose their reasons for withdrawing consent.
6. Students may decline to give consent to be examined by tutors and peers. Students are not required to disclose their reasons for refusing consent.
7. Students who refuse or withdraw consent may discuss this decision with their tutor and/or the course director. All parties will handle this discussion sensitively and confidentially.
8. Tutors must not coerce students into consenting to be examined.
9. Tutors must not take a refusal into account when considering the student’s academic performance.
10. In the event of discovery of a suspicious finding, inappropriate behaviour, or a breach in confidentiality, tutors and students will follow the adverse event procedures outlined below.

Adverse Events Procedures

Discovery of a suspicious finding

During physical examination of students by peers and tutors it is possible that a new suspicious finding may be discovered, for example, discovery of a mass, a heart murmur, or elevated blood pressure. The goal is to enable the student to obtain timely medical attention.

The following steps will be taken:

1. The examining student confidentially informs the examined student of the suspicious finding.
2. The examining student determines whether the student is already aware of the suspicious finding.
3. Both students confidentially inform their tutor.
4. The tutor asks permission to perform the same physical examination.
5. If the tutor confirms the suspicious finding, the tutor recommends that the student seeks medical advice.
6. The tutor reminds both students of the duty of the examining student to maintain confidentiality regarding the incident.

Inappropriate behaviour

Inappropriate behaviour, such as inappropriate use of medical equipment, offensive language, or physical abuse may occur during physical examination of students by peers and tutors. Tutors may directly witness inappropriate behaviour or be alerted to it by a student. The consequence for inappropriate behaviour will vary and will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

The following steps will be taken:

1. The tutor speaks to the student(s) behaving inappropriately.
2. The tutor informs the student that their behaviour is inappropriate and may be a breach of University or Faculty policy or standard.
3. For serious breaches of behaviour, the tutor contacts the course director regarding the incident.
4. The course director checks applicable policies and standards regarding the incident and takes required actions.
5. If a student has potentially been harmed by the inappropriate behavior, the tutor ensures that he or she seeks appropriate care (i.e. counseling).

Breach in confidentiality

Confidential information about a student may be revealed during history taking or physical examination. For example, students may reveal a history of medical issues, or physical examination may reveal surgical scars. It is possible in these situations that a breach in confidentiality may occur despite students being taught about the importance of confidentiality.

NOTE: Some students may willingly provide specific consent to have their physical findings used for the instruction of others, which would not breach confidentiality.

The following steps will be taken in the case of a breach in confidentiality:

1. The tutor takes the student(s) who breached confidentiality aside to speak with them.
2. The tutor informs the student(s) that sharing confidential information without consent is unacceptable and a breach of standards.
3. The tutor contacts the local site coordinator and course director regarding the incident.
4. The course director checks applicable policies and standards regarding the incident and takes required actions.
5. The tutor ensures the student whose confidentiality has been breached is informed and, if required, seeks appropriate care (i.e. counseling).