

How Students Should Evaluate Their Peers in Student Team Exercises (STEs)
Office of Educational Development
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Mrs. Rogers has been a patient of Dr. Barnes for more than 15 years. She depends on Dr. Barnes and his colleagues for her health care. Mrs. Rogers, who is getting along in age, lives for her grandchildren. She has admonished Dr. Barnes to keep her on the go so that she can see her grandchildren through to adulthood. Yesterday, Mrs. Rogers complained to Dr. Barnes that she had been waking up at night with a vague pain that seemed to move from her chest to her arm. After examining Mrs. Rogers and conducting tests, Dr. Barnes decided to refer her to a cardiologist. What should Dr. Barnes consider in selecting a cardiologist for his valued patient? How should he evaluate a peer to treat Mrs. Rogers?

Referring patients to other physicians is one of the many decisions that physicians make in which they are evaluating their peers. A physician who takes a “business as usual” attitude toward peer evaluation may cause his valued patients to receive poor care, and their relatives thus suffer as well. Patients may begin to associate the physician’s standard of care with the poor care they received based on his referral. Over time, the public’s confidence in the medical profession may suffer from the belief that “doctors will cover for doctors.”

To challenge students to consider seriously the actions of their peers when making referral decisions, the faculty of the UNC School of Medicine is encouraging students to consider the many ethical and professional obligations of physicians. In that vein, students participating in Student Team Exercises (STEs) are encouraged to take their STE peer assessment seriously. When an instructor observes that the average readiness exam score for a student team is low and the team’s task decisions are poor—yet the team members give one another high ratings—what does that say about the standards of care that these future physicians may offer? Could Mrs. Rogers and other patients expecting the best care from such doctors count on receiving it?

The STE Peer Evaluation Form asks STE team members to certify the presence of fellow team members and evaluate their contribution to the team’s efforts to accomplish its assigned tasks. At “Present?” students should mark “Y” and complete the four peer evaluation items only for team members who are actually present. To treat absent team members as present in medical practice may expose a physician to legal liability.

As physicians’ skills rest on their knowledge, Item 1 on the Peer Evaluation Form asks team members to rate the preparation of peers. Poorly prepared team members may actually hinder the team’s accomplishment in coming up with appropriate problem-solving solutions during the small group activity.

Item 2 asks team members to evaluate the contributions their peers make to the team’s efforts to accomplish the assigned task. Even when well-prepared, each student must make a personal choice to contribute to the team’s efforts. Some students may make contributions that are clearly significant. To give all team members high ratings on item 2 when only some

members have made significant contributions shows disrespect for the greater efforts of those team members.

Modern medicine is team-based and requires mutual cooperation and respect among physicians and fellow health professionals. Item 3 asks team members to rate their peers' respect and esprit de corps. Disrespectful or dismissive team members inhibit participation and therefore hurt the team's success at accomplishing its tasks.

Item 4 asks team members to give credit to their peers who made noticeable efforts to resolve disputes within their team. As STE team decisions determine in part students' course grades, disagreement over strategies may lead to personal conflicts that hurt the team's success on the assigned task.

Students should use only a No. 2 pencil to bubble in their responses on the STE Peer Assessment Form. After completing the Student Team Exercise, students should turn in their forms and pencils as directed.