Recognising teaching talent

Dear Editor:
There can be no greater misfortune for an intelligent individual than to be caught in a wrong profession. When its influence extends to society in a profession like medical education, the situation becomes grim. We frequently discuss measures to improve learning in our profession but seldom question the quality of teachers involved.\(^{[1,2]}\)

The vast majority of our medical institutes are managed by the government and it is unfortunate to observe that out of the huge faculty only a handful are truly teacher material. Others are there for the associated job security or to harvest the benefits the society places on doctors and more so on those involved in education.

We’ve observed the characteristics of a successful teacher. While one can never be fully sure of these early in career when the selections are made, yet they can be indicators both for the individual and the selection panel. Choosing the correct seed for the environment makes a tree flourish, on the other hand, working on a misplaced plant to suit the surroundings, makes it just survive. A medical teacher should essentially have the following qualities:

1. Learner for life. With the ever-changing medical field, one should be a keen learner. As a clinician, one can afford to be complacent after mastering the common diseases but as a teacher who would be bombarded by questions from young inquisitive minds, one has to be on his toes. This trait can be identified when an individual is involved in logical out of the box thinking, isn’t shy of accepting his ignorance and willing to work for betterment. Concentrating on the quality and content of publications rather than just the numbers would also provide some insight into this characteristic

2. Communicator. A teacher should have command over at least one language. He should be able to explain concepts in the least possible words without making assumptions about the basic knowledge of audience. It is said that if a man blind from birth can draw an elephant correctly only based on the description being given, the communication has been satisfactory

3. Munificence or generosity. Mentoring is only for the large hearted as seeing your junior perform better than you with lesser effort gives jitters even to the best. One should be able to genuinely feel proud of students and youngsters (who are not students) who get associated with different capacities. Moreover, not letting the students who fail to acknowledge you to affect your attitude towards future batches is not an easy task. Gradually, as one gets senior the gap with the mentees in terms of age, knowledge and patience becomes greater and it is at this stage that this basic quality
becomes all the more important. It is equivalent to being emotionally connected as a parent for a few years and then letting go. This trait is difficult to judge; however, seeking information of juniors mentored or getting feedback from them at the time of selection may be helpful. There is a system of anonymous feedback by the students in western universities, which may eventually be followed. 

There are many other important qualities in an ideal teacher like being a good clinician which can be acquired and traits like integrity, compassion, punctuality etc. which should be central to any good human being not specifically a teacher. Making conditions appropriate to attract the best towards teaching is also a different topic. 

The selection of faculty in government institutes is usually a one-way ticket and probably the most important responsibility the members of the panel execute in their lives. An appropriate selection is only the start, and this individual would require grooming for years in a conducive environment to blossom into an effective teacher. The impact a good teacher has on the future generations of doctors, patients, and the society can never be overestimated.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.

Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

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