How, what and from where to learn? Questions arising from early clinical exposure

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The article published in Medical Education by Barret et al. (1), identified the sub-theme of ‘messiness of clinical learning’ as one of many problems faced by medical students when first entering a clinical environment. ‘Messiness’ in this case refers to the ability of early clinical exposure to leave students struggling to identify how and what to learn effectively. As a medical student at the early stages of clinical exposure, I too can resonate with this struggle.

The lack of definitive guidance on this matter is often an unfamiliar challenge that many students must face. Throughout education in the UK, students have always been provided with a structure on which they are able to base their learning. This continues from an early school level, all the way to medical school, where students will often use lectures to direct their way through pre-clinical years. Suddenly then, to be thrust into a clinical environment, without a navigational aid, can be a very overwhelming process.

I agree with the suggestions made by Barret et al. (1), that students need clarification on the best approach to tackling the ‘vast messiness’ (2) of clinical knowledge. At Birmingham medical school, third-year students are provided with a handbook containing key learning outcomes which are to be followed throughout the year. These learning outcomes are also given to those involved in the delivery of clinical education. Student teaching is then optimized to ensure that learning outcomes are being continuously met over the year. This integrated approach between the medical school and teaching hospitals provides students with both clarity and a reference point.

One important issue not addressed in the article is how students decide from where to learn. For the majority of students, the Oxford clinical handbook represents a suitable answer to this question and usually comes recommended by medical schools and older years. However, there are students like myself, who find the handbook either too overloaded with information or simply do not suit the learning style of the handbook. For us, there are few other resources available, let alone made known to us, by either medical school or the hospital.

The ability of medical schools to provide clarity on how, what and from where to learn, is fundamental to a student’s ability to successfully navigate the early clinical environment. It is important then, that medical schools do all that
they can to ensure such questions are rightly addressed.

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**Notes On Contributors**

Arjuna Thakker is a 4th-year medical student currently studying at the University of Birmingham, UK.

**Bibliography/References**


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**Declaration of Interest**

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.