Context

There is concern about the ability of newly qualified doctors to prescribe safely, and it is said nurses are taught more and better about pharmacology than doctors. Despite considerable curriculum time given to pharmacology examiners consistently comment that, relative to their other skills, students’ ability in prescribing is low. We believed that it was not lack of teaching but a failure to learn and integrate the knowledge that was responsible.

Desert Island Drugs

Students are tasked to choose the 8 most important drugs (in addition to paracetamol, prednisolone, amoxicillin and insulin) to treat patients on a desert island. Strangely, their illnesses will be exactly those seen in primary care in the East Midlands. Each student compiles their personal list considering efficacy, side effects and cost. They then debate in their small group a consensus list. Each group presents its selection to three other groups and their tutors. Following the presentations, which are assessed for content, originality of approach and engagement of the audience, the groups debate the pros and cons of their selections, in a discussion mediated by a senior pharmacist.

Results

79 (63%) undertook the quiz in the first two weeks. achieving a mean of 45.6% (Range: 17 – 75)
There was no significant difference in average scores for the first attempt at the quiz in each of the three cohorts. 54 (43%) undertook the quiz in the final two weeks, with a mean score: of 54.3% (Range 23 – 91).
46 (36.8%) students completed the quiz twice. The difference in score out of 65 on the second attempt ranged from minus 11 to plus 25 with an average improvement of 9.1. Seven students declined permission to use their data in the analysis.

Discussion

Written feedback from students indicated that they found it useful to review the mechanism of action, uses, doses, costs, interactions and side effects of common drugs used in practice, and to consider the variation between different drugs within the same group. The consensus discussions encouraged them to explore a broader range of drugs than they would have done alone. Their use of the British National Formulary increased. Positive comments were made about the benefit of team-working and development of presentation skills.

This intervention has been perceived by the students as being a useful and enjoyable addition to the Clinical Methods Course. While not possible to quantify the change in knowledge as a result of the intervention, the overall improvement in performance in the EMQs would appear to indicate that the module as a whole results in improved pharmacology knowledge.

References

Maxwell SW, Walley T; Ferner, RE. Using drugs safely. BMJ. 2002;324(7343):930-1