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Perspective

The NExT Wave: Raising the Bar for Healthcare Professionals

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In accordance with the National Medical Council (NMC) Act of 2019, the government has set forth plans to introduce a comprehensive National Exit Test (NExT). NExT is designed to serve a dual role i.e., acting as a singular examination for certifying the eligibility of medical graduates to grant the license to practice modern medicine and determining the eligibility for the purpose of allocation of postgraduate residencies.[1] It aims to bring objectivity in the assessment and ensure minimum standards in the medical education being provided all throughout the country in line with One Nation- One Examination.

The NMC aims to conduct the examination in 2 steps. Step 1 shall be a Multiple Choice Question (MCQ) based screening test involving six papers and applied aspects of all the basic science and para-clinical subjects. In comparison to the current MCQs-based examinations, it is expected to include MCQs of higher order including clinical vignettes, extended matching type, problem-solving and application-based questions. Step 2 shall be a practical-based examination which would assess the expected skills of an Indian Medical Graduate (IMG). The merit for postgraduate admission would be solely based on the marks of Step 1. Results of Step 2 shall be declared as Pass/ Fail only.

However, there exist several pressing concerns that necessitate clarification, emphasizing the importance of comprehending the viewpoints of faculty, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students regarding NExT.

Despite the challenges it presents, NExT holds the promise of multiple potential benefits. As the exclusive combined entrance and licensing examination, it has the capacity to alleviate the complications associated with multiple entrance tests, travel, and examination fees. Furthermore, it seeks to standardize the examination process, incorporating the 'Competency-Based Medical Education' (CBME) assessment framework, thereby ensuring uniformity and maintaining a minimum standard of medical education in the summative assessment across the country.

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This approach not only evaluates the expected knowledge and skills of medical graduates but also places a strong emphasis on critical thinking and conceptual learning. The new assessment method introduced with NExT may bear similarities to the existing United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) in terms of its structure and type of clinical vignettes. Such a shift has the potential to not only enhance public confidence in medical professionals but also contribute to making Indian medical graduates globally relevant and enhance "consumer confidence" in healthcare professionals.[2]

The merit-determining aspect of NExT, conducted before the internship, permits medical students to learn and demonstrate medical skills without the undue pressure of a theory-based entrance examination, such as the existing NEET PG. This is expected to fulfil the purpose of the internship. The inclusion of clinical skill-based assessments in Step 2, such as the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), may further motivate students to actively engage in hospitals, observe, and master various aspects of clinical examination.

However, both students and educators have voiced legitimate concerns about this new assessment methodology. Questions have arisen regarding whether an MCQ-based examination can effectively replace the theory-based final examination. Can NExT be considered a "complete" assessment? The two-step structure of the examination has led to confusion and uncertainty among medical students, extending from the year of implementation to the criteria for multiple attempts to improve scores. The first part is MCQ-based and marked, while the second part, following the internship, is likely to involve OSCE and other case-based assessment systems that test competencies and are graded as "pass" or "fail."

Additionally, there is a lack of clarity on how to integrate multiple batches of interns - the primary batch and those who clear the examination in later attempts. There is an urgent need for comprehensive assessments related to faculty readiness, medical universities, the assessment module, and human resources. Ambiguity persists regarding the role of individual universities in the assessment of medical students.

Moreover, there is a valid concern that students may become overly focused on examinations, potentially leading them to prioritize coaching and rote memorization over attending college lectures, thereby fostering the emergence of "dummy colleges." This situation could result in students excelling in MCQs but lacking the spirit of exploratory learning.[3] However, with the appropriate utilization of competency assessment and efficient implementation of NExT, it has the potential to bring about a transformative change in medical education. Nonetheless, it presents a significant challenge for teachers to deliver such education and for students to adapt within a short timeframe.

In this evolving landscape, medical teachers will witness an increasing integration of technology in their classes, incorporating virtual patient encounters, simulation, and other experiential learning tools, along with the utilization of virtual reality and augmented reality. Integration amongst subjects being taught at different years of the medical schools with applied aspects, interdisciplinary training, teamwork, and ethical decision-making will assume greater importance and application.

Given that NExT is designed to fulfil two primary objectives, the evaluation methods must be valid, appropriate, and feasible for assessing each of these objectives individually.[4] Ultimately, this approach aims to produce "competent doctors" who are not only essential for our country but also needed worldwide.

In conclusion, ongoing dialogue between policymakers, healthcare educators, and stakeholders, meticulous planning, and precise execution are essential to address these concerns and ensure a smooth transition to this new paradigm in medical education. This transformation is likely to shape the future of the medical profession in India and have a significant impact on the health and well-being of the population.

Conflict of Interest: None

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