Documentary research and evaluation in medical education

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Medical education research has blossomed over the past 30 years. There are a growing number of general medical education journals and even some that cater for sub disciplines within medical education. [1] The content of these journals ranges from original research to systematic reviews to perspectives and opinion pieces. The original research itself takes a variety of forms from quantitative to qualitative—both of which categories contain a variety of methodologies. However there is one form of research that rarely features in the medical education literature and that is documentary research. Documentary research is research involving the analysis of documents (typically historical documents). It is undertaken for a number of reasons but primarily to gain insight into activities of the past and into the processes of change that have led from the past to the present. Hegel said that “we learn from history that we do not learn from history, “ but here I would beg to differ. In medical education, we can learn from the past and just one example of this is the recent paper by Gill and Griffin [2] in Medical Education. In this paper, the authors analysed the text of Good Medical Practice produced by the General Medical Council between 1963 and 2010. Their analysis showed that there had been a “shift from a doctor-centred regulatory discourse to a patient-centred health improvement agenda over the period of time examined.” The core purpose of documentary research is ultimately educational evaluation. The reason why we conduct documentary research on policy papers, journal articles or even written curricula is to evaluate them and share the lessons learned from evaluation on to others.

So what is a document? A document may be defined as “an original or official paper relied on as the basis, proof, or support of something” or as “a writing conveying information” according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary. A document may be produced by an individual or a team of individuals or by an organisation. Documents might be private and created for an individual’s own use or perhaps for family friends only (e.g., diaries or personal letters). Alternative documents might be public documents published in journals or public records. In the medical education research domain, documentary research will mainly involve documents published in journals or public records. A document may be primary or secondary. A primary document is an original document and typically a direct report of a research study or an opinion or a perspective. A secondary document is a document produced by means of an analysis or study of one or more primary documents. Either or both may be used in documentary research but the researcher should be clear as to which type of document is being reported on. A variety of forms of documents are available to the medical education documentary researcher the most common ones are as below.

Textbooks of medical education are one type of document. Textbooks on the subject have been around since the middle of the last century. They can offer deep insights into the formats, values and theories that have driven medical education in the past and into how these have evolved into the formats, values and theories that we hold today. Educational reports are another source of important evidence from the past. Sometimes they can show us what has changed and sometimes what hasn’t changed; sometimes they can show us what we continually plan to change but never actually do. According to Christakis [3], there has been remarkable similarity between the proposals over the past 100 years to reform medical education in the USA: “Reforms such as increasing generalist training, increasing ambulatory care exposure, providing social science courses, teaching lifelong and self-learning skills, rewarding teaching, clarifying the school mission, and centralizing curriculum control have appeared almost continuously since 1910.” Growing transparency in all walks of life means that board