

The Hidden Cost of Failing to Fail

(Why borderline residents should be failed)

*Zeev Friedman MD
Associate Professor
Department of Anesthesia and Pain Management
Sinai Health System, University of Toronto*

Is failing to fail
just a myth?



Methods

- Email from the program director to all faculty containing a personal link to a website
- Asked to assess the performance of a struggling resident
- 2 groups: The assessment will inform the need for remediation (high stakes) or is for program development only (low stakes)
- Participants assessed a video depicting an actor managing a scripted anaphylaxis simulation
- It contained several critical clinical mistakes constituting a clear fail performance.
- Participants were asked to provide a fail or pass grade (primary-outcome).

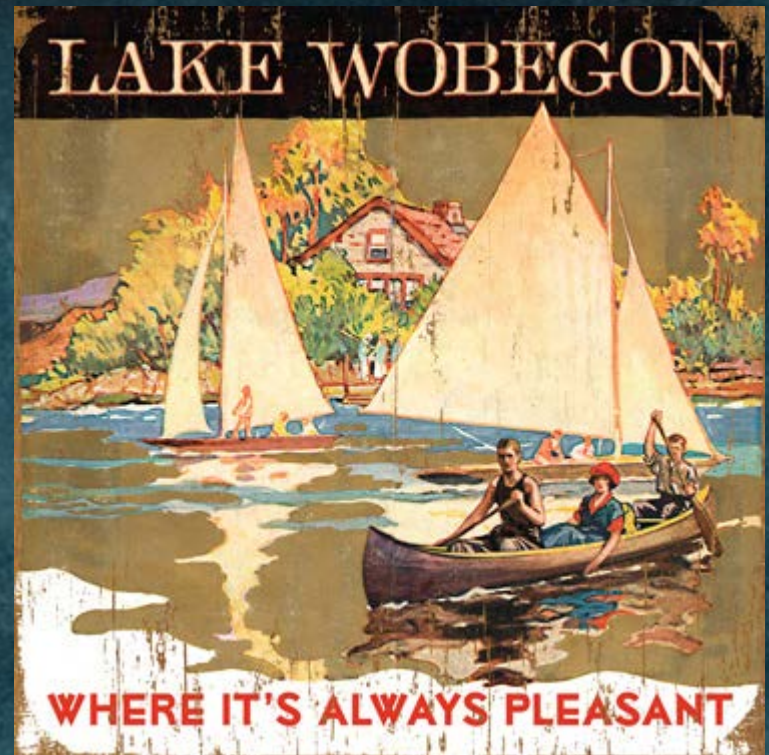
Bets?

Why do we pass poor trainees?



The Town of Lake Wobegon

The town where: All the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average



The Lake Wobegon effect, a natural human tendency to overestimate one's capabilities

Faculty struggle to provide honest feedback and consistent evaluations. In one study raters rated 66% of trainees “above average”

Contributing categories

- Trainee factors
- Assessment tool
- Repercussions to faculty
- Access to remediation or support

The costs of dismissing a resident

- Considerable personal/financial implications for resident
- Increased work load (staff and residents)
- Morale of remaining residents
- Possible legal implications



Enough to give any rational program director
pause before considering this

bord·er·line
'bôrdər, līn/

Barely acceptable in quality or as belonging to a category

Some synonyms: marginal, uncertain, unsettled, doubtful, indeterminate

The Hidden Costs of Failing to Fail Residents

- In 2000, after a long multi-continent medical murder spree, Michael Swango was finally caught
- Nine years later, Nidal Hasan was charged with the shooting deaths of 9 soldiers at Fort Hood.
- Both were doctors identified as potentially dangerous at multiple junctures throughout their residency.
- Both were allowed to continue despite serious concerns on the part of peers, faculty, and others.

The cost of failing to fail (\$11M in this case)

Western U. sued over 'substandard' medical residency

UWO graduate is suing the school for failing to give him the education needed to pass the medical microbiology exam



Dr. James Ian Stuart is suing Western University for breach of contract and breach of fiduciary duty, alleging that the poor quality of its residency program cost him his dream of becoming a medical microbiologist. (RENÉ JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR)

Multifactorial patient care problems

- Professionalism and/or clinical performance
- There is risk to the patient when an incompetent provider gives care
- Overwork and dissatisfaction when others cover for the incompetence
- Difficult relations with peers or other health care workers
- Lower morale, and shifting of work to residents who are perceived to be more amiable

The message we're sending

- To other residents, coworkers, and the general public
- More difficult to quantify, but also more alarming:

When an underperforming resident is tolerated, whether it is incompetent performance or inappropriate professional behavior, it diminishes the profession

- We have to consider both the apparent costs of dismissing a disruptive resident and the hidden costs of not doing so

- “I have witnessed a ward manager passing someone who was, quite frankly, dangerous, because she didn’t want to deal with the paperwork”
- “The university applies huge pressure to staff who fail a student [and they] tend to pass the failed student on mitigating circumstances, so [failing them] is generally seen as pointless”
- I couldn’t believe this student and yet she’d passed the other clinical assessments... I realized other mentors had passed her and I was so, so angry ... why had they let her go on? I couldn’t believe it, don’t they understand about professional responsibility.

- Success is convenient for everyone.
- "I don't think any of us want to see somebody throw four years of their life out the window..." (Preceptor)

- “It is far easier to pass a student than it is to fail them. I felt I was the failure”
- “I was bullied into signing off learning outcomes and then my comments about attitude and competence were ignored by the university”
- Success is convenient for everyone.
- "I don't think any of us want to see somebody throw four years of their life out the window..."
(Preceptor)



**PATIENT
SAFETY**

- So if you are thinking of giving a student the „benefit of the doubt“ then you should consider whether it is in the best interests of the patients, your clients, the student, subsequent mentors and the profession as a whole.”

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