Losing Culture on the Way to Competence: The Use and Misuse of Culture in Medical Education

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The medical cultural competence movement was founded to address physician ignorance about the effects of culture and culture-specific beliefs on health and health care. The authors of this journal article funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation explore what they consider to be a fundamental disconnect between the two elements of this movement: cross-cultural education programs, and the use of these programs to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health care. This paper discusses the mismatch between the design of these programs and their current applications, which, in coming together, collapse forces affecting minority populations (e.g., poverty, violence and racism) into the unthreatening concept "culture." The authors provide five central concepts that they recommend including in cultural competence curricula to address this issue.

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