SPANISH LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION
A Modular and Longitudinal Curriculum for Medical Students

John F. Mahoney, MD, Evangelina Kidwai, MA, Ivonne M. Daly, MD, Diego Chaves-Gnecco MD, MPH

PURPOSE
Faculty and students recognize that the health care community must be prepared to communicate with Spanish-speaking patients, but it has been challenging to practically and effectively introduce language instruction into an already packed medical school curriculum. This new initiative provides highly motivated students with a spectrum of level-appropriate opportunities for learning Spanish.

METHODS
Five major activities comprise the core components of this elective series:

Basic Spanish for Medical Students— Held in July after first year, this elementary-level course helps learners with no prior Spanish language skills to acquire skills in pronunciation, vocabulary, and conversation. It uses medical conversation and vocabulary as the vehicle for acquisition of these fundamentals. Two 2-hour sessions each week are supplemented by independent study using a web-based instructional program specifically designed for this four-week course.

Spanish Café Series— Held on a bi-weekly basis, students meet at lunchtime to practice conversing in Spanish with Spanish-fluent clinicians, staff, standardized patients, and community volunteers.

Essential Medical Spanish for Clinicians— This 4-week/8-session evening course targets the needs of third- or fourth-year students who are preparing for an international experience where they will have direct contact with Spanish-speaking patients. It assumes a working knowledge of general Spanish from prior courses or experience. Students who opt to enroll in this course more than once will gain even more from the program as they become conversation partners for less experienced learners.

Senior Clinical Electives with Spanish Immersion— These 4-week clinical senior electives are offered in partnership with other medical schools in the U.S., in locations with a substantial proportion of Spanish-speaking patients. Students benefit from a solid clinical rotation and from pre-planned opportunities to use their Spanish language skills in a relatively protected, yet challenging, environment.

Salud Clinic Volunteer Programs— Students may volunteer at Salud and other local clinic settings that serve Spanish-speaking patients.

RESULTS
The initial Basic Spanish course offering was heavily subscribed by students, and interest in enrollment continues to swell. The summer after first year is an ideal time to undertake language study. Students may have daytime commitments to research or clinical experiences, but have ample personal time to commit to intensive language study—in contrast to the paucity of time and attention available during the academic year. They have also already mastered a new vocabulary of thousands of biomedical terms and are on the steeply ascending side of their ability to assimilate new information. Student interest in the subsequent programs is high, even as they are being piloted.

CONCLUSIONS
Medical students can successfully undertake Spanish language instruction when it is conducted in formats that adapt to students’ schedules and needs. These electives provide a valuable opportunity for students to customize their learning and develop language skills that can serve them throughout their careers.

For more information: www.omed.pitt.edu/curriculum/themes-spanish.php