Unanswered Questions and Unquestioned Answers: Teaching Biomedical (and Other) Ignorance Live and on the Internet to Promote Curiosity, Learning, and Discovery

Marlys H. Witte, MD, and Michael Bernas, MS, Department of Surgery and Student Research Programs, University of Arizona, and Ignorance Foundation, Inc., Tucson, AZ.

Despite widespread recognition that biomedical facts decay exponentially in this era of spectacular discovery, few appreciate and still fewer teach students about the dynamic relationship between Knowledge and its mirror image–Ignorance. Yet Ignorance—in the sense of unanswered questions and unquestioned answers—is the true terra incognita of Learning and Discovery—whether as individuals, groups, or global communities—and in all disciplines. Simply stated: Ignorance is the raw material of Knowledge (and vice versa). To uncork and nurture student curiosity about the unknown, our Curriculum on Medical (and Other) Ignorance has developed a thematic course of study, research preceptorships to pursue progressive questions, multimedia teaching tools and transportable modules, and “supradisciplinary” international partnerships along with a multifaceted evaluation plan. In this interactive conference session, we will explore together the lands and dimensions of Ignorance, the notion of “puzzles before facts,” steps to transform traditional classes and laboratories (in any discipline) into ignorance-based inquiry experiences; and preview our team’s web-based Medical Ignorance Exploratorium and Virtual/TeleResearch Center with its Questionator© and Islands of Medical Ignorance© features. Time will be set aside for a question-answer-question period and for “linger longer” consultations on Ignorance.