“Google can answer anything you want, but it can’t tell you what you ought to be asking.”
— Ian Leslie, from Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends On It

As a preceptor for a critical care inpatient hospital experience, I see many students in their final year struggle to answer clinical questions using their drug information resources. One of my most recent students became flustered after a particular round of questions and stated, “You want what’s in here,” holding her mobile device, “to be in here,” pointing to her head. While the expectation of a pharmacist (and student pharmacist) is not to have the entire breadth and depth of drug information memorized verbatim, the student’s response brings up a very interesting dilemma facing both practicing pharmacists and learners alike. Pharmacists are drug information experts; therefore, they are expected to know a great deal of information about a wide variety of medications, yet this information is theoretically available and easily accessible to everyone. So, what, then is the role of the pharmacist, and how do we prepare students to take on this role? And how can we ensure curricular reform efforts continue to produce practice-ready pharmacists?

The opening quote speaks to the challenge facing this generation of learners and educators. How do we encourage learning for the sake of learning when an abundance of answers, facts, and data are available with a click? Enhancing and stimulating curiosity is one important method to foster this type of learning. Author Ian Leslie, in his book titled, Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends On It, describes the concepts of “diversive” and “epistemic” curiosity. While the concept of curiosity is certainly familiar on the surface to most people, the psychological constructs of diversive and epistemic curiosity point to two important, yet disparate, ideas about the purpose of curiosity.

Diversive curiosity is the basic desire for something new or different, and it is analogous to a puzzle in that a puzzle has a predetermined solution that is unknown at the beginning and takes time to fully realize. Every headline to a news article is designed to evoke diversive curiosity and encourage someone to read or to click, which then leads to finding a solution to the puzzle and satisfying the diversive curiosity. Think of looking up the dose of a drug as a pharmacy-related example of this type of curiosity. Like a puzzle, the pieces (or facts) are available and relatively constant, but they need to be obtained (or arranged) by the person seeking them.

Epistemic curiosity, however, is the need to gather new knowledge expected to stimulate intellectual interest (ie, gaining knowledge for the sake of learning). Derived from “epistemology,” or the study of knowledge and knowledge gathering, epistemic curiosity is more analogous to a mystery, in which many facts are unknown and there is no certainty of an absolute answer. From Leslie’s
No educator or pharmacy program can create a big enough “gap” to fill (meaning, diverse curiosity) for learners that exactly mimics everything seen in pharmacy practice. Rather, we rely on students to have epistemic curiosity to use the models provided by educators as constructs to apply to other situations, gradually learning to anticipate and appropriately manage problems.

Given the current landscape of curricular reform efforts and the challenges facing educators and students regarding availability of information, assessing and enhancing epistemic curiosity should be a priority for pharmacy programs. This approach will require further research into best curricular and co-curricular practices, but it should also focus on ensuring that students are “primed” with the right knowledge at various experiential stages to optimize the learning environment. Because this type of education requires more self-directed students as aforementioned, change will likely be needed beyond the curriculum into all aspects of pharmacy programs including admissions, student services, and assessment. Still, the first step is curricular reform. As educators, we need to encourage students to exercise their epistemic curiosity whenever possible and teach them to understand that while finding the answers can be elusive, asking the right questions is the most important place to start.

REFERENCES
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