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Utilising Virtual Microscopy to Teach Haematology in a Regional University

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Virtual microscopy is now commonly used in large institutions for teaching anatomical sciences. This approach uses online technology to bring traditional glass slides from the light microscope to the computer. One major advantage of virtual microscopy is the ability for students and faculty to access the learning material anywhere and anytime. This is particularly important for training in laboratory haematology, which has a large visual learning component and requires considerable practice to competently identify cells. Computer-based learning also reduces the teaching load of academics by permitting self-study exercises and promoting small group, student-led cooperative learning. Virtual microscopy software is also engaging and dynamic for the student.

Despite the many advantages of virtual microscopy it has not been readily utilised in smaller or less financial institutions. A pilot study (n=8 students) in a small regional university was designed to use virtual microscopy alongside traditional light microscopy in a case studies curriculum.

Results from the pilot study suggest that, although students wanted to learn light microscopy techniques including how to identify cells on a glass slide, virtual microscopy promoted stronger learning in haematology. When working with virtual microscopy students actively engaged in peer learning, and were more likely to complete virtual haematology cases and study the virtual slides outside of laboratory class time.

Once virtual microscopy is established in this regional university, the intention is to disseminate the tools and outcomes of the activities with other regional universities and professional continuing education programs.