Inter-professional Clinical Placements as a Recruitment Strategy in Geriatrics: Survey of Students’ Perceptions

Ruby E. Grymonpre, Cornelia van Ineveld and Michelle Nelson

Abstract

Inter-professional (IP) education and clinical placements have been identified as educational recruitment strategies to address the health workforce shortage. The research question in this secondary analysis study was, “What are students’ attitudes toward working in geriatric environments and as part of inter-professional collaborative teams?” A five-item survey was administered to 47 pre-licensure learners from five different health professional programs (medicine, nursing, pharmacy, occupational therapy and physical therapy). Findings suggest that students want to practise on IP teams, which may influence their graduate first choice of employment. Although stronger evidence is required, offering IP clinical placements may be an important recruitment strategy, especially for those sites traditionally deemed less desirable.

Background

The delivery of primary care to our aging society is one important aspect of our healthcare care system. Our population is aging. It is estimated that by 2021, 19% of the Canadian population will be ages 65 years or older. Persons over the age 85 comprise the most rapidly growing group within that demographic (Statistics Canada 2010). The health and social needs of older persons are complex, requiring evidence-based care from a wide range of healthcare professionals.

Unfortunately, the expansion of the workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to provide health and social care for older adults has not kept pace with these changing demographics. Despite a near doubling of practising geriatricians in Canada from an estimated 111 in 1995 to 211 in 2007, numbers are still well below the estimated demand of 538 (Carstairs and Keon 2009). Similarly, the numbers of social workers, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, physical and occupational therapists, psychologists and dietitians with advanced training in geriatrics remain low (Carstairs and Keon 2009; Shay and Burris 2008). Geriatrics is undervalued as a healthcare specialty (Carstairs and Keon 2009). There is a perception that geriatrics isn’t “real” medicine because it is considered hands-off and low-tech: “Why take care of crusty old people when you can be a brain surgeon who wows his guests at dinner parties?” (Karvounis 2008). Reimbursement contributes to this problem, as annual salaries in geriatrics are at the lower end of the medical specialties (Carstairs and Keon 2009; Karvounis 2008).

Inter-professional education for collaborative patient-centred practice (IECPCP) has been identified as one strategy that can improve the satisfaction, recruitment and retention of healthcare professionals (Association of Faculties of Medicine of
There is growing, albeit-limited evidence that offering opportunities to train on an inter-professional collaborative team provides recruitment incentives to graduating students in healthcare (Baldwin et al. 1980, 2007; Charles et al. 2006, 2008; McNair 2005; Mu et al. 2004; Rhyne et al. 2006).

The research question for this secondary analysis study was, “What are students’ attitudes toward working in geriatric environments and as part of inter-professional collaborative teams?” Results from the primary study have been published previously (Grymonpre et al. 2010a, 2010b).

Methods

Study Procedures
This project received the approval of the University of Manitoba Ethics Board.

Student Recruitment
During traditional pre-licensure training at the University of Manitoba, senior health profession students are required to complete clinical placements (also referred to as clerkship in medicine, fieldwork in occupational and physical therapy and senior practicums in nursing). As part of a larger controlled before-and-after study and following the usual procedures used by each academic unit, students were allocated to do their placement at either one of three study geriatric day hospital sites (test participants) or a non-study placement site (control participants). Both test and control students were invited to participate in this baseline survey prior to their clinical placements.

Quantitative Data Analysis
Learners were asked to indicate their responses to the following five-item survey:
1. To what extent do you anticipate an emphasis in geriatrics in your career? (Response options were not at all and extensively.)
2. When choosing (looking) for your next position, how will the opportunity to participate in an interdisciplinary team influence your decision? (Response options were negatively, neutral, or positively.)
3. To what extent do you believe that your ability to work in an interdisciplinary team will contribute to your professional success? (Response options were not important or very important.)
4. What is the likelihood that you will seek additional training in team care after completing this program? (Response options were highly unlikely or highly likely.)
5. What is the likelihood that you will see additional training in geriatrics after completing this program? (Response options were highly unlikely or highly likely.)

Quantitative data were entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (Statistical Package for Social Sciences Advanced Models 2007). Data analysis for this study included descriptive (frequencies, means) statistical methods.

Results
The demographic data of responding participants are presented in Table 1. The question, “To what extent do you believe that your ability to work in an interdisciplinary team will contribute to your professional success?” elicited a response of very important (versus not important) by 46 of 46 (100%) student participants. In considering the statement, “When choosing (looking for) your next position, how will the opportunity to participate in an interdisciplinary team influence your decision?” 33 of 46 (72%) of students responded positively (versus neutral or negatively). However, in response to the statement, “What is the likelihood that you will seek additional training in team care after completing this program?” only 28 of 45 (62%) students indicated highly likely (versus highly unlikely). In response to the statement, “To what extent do you anticipate an emphasis in geriatrics in your career?” 32 of 41 (78%) students indicated extensively (versus not at all), whereas about half of the respondents (57%) indicated highly likely (versus highly unlikely) in response to the statement, “What is the likelihood that you will seek additional training in geriatrics after completing this program?”

TABLE 1.
Demographic data on student learner participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 (27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27 (73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discipline</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmacy</td>
<td>12 (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>8 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiotherapy</td>
<td>7 (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>6 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational therapy</td>
<td>4 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prior IPE</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18 (49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 (51)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IPE = inter-professional education.
* n=37, data were missing for 9 participants.

Discussion
The results of this study help to inform our understanding of senior students’ desire to work in collaborative practice environ-
ments and particularly in the area of geriatrics. The most notable finding from this analysis was that, at baseline, 100% of student participants carried strong beliefs that working on an inter-professional team would contribute to their professional success. Additionally, a relatively high proportion of all students (72%) indicated they were more likely to seek out employment opportunities that fostered collaborative practice environments. This suggests that work environments that support and promote collaborative practice may have greater success in recruiting graduates from health professional programs.

The value of promoting collaborative practice environments as a recruitment incentive is gaining ground. For example, recognizing the clinical and workforce challenges facing the US Department of Veterans Affairs, experts in geriatrics, healthcare policy and finance rated the provision of inter-professional care within the top 10 priorities to include in this organization's strategic plan to address these challenges (Shay and Burris 2008).

Given the apparent motivation by student respondents in this study to practise in collaborative environments, an unexpected finding from this analysis was the relatively low proportion (62%) of students indicating a high likelihood of actually seeking additional training in team care after completing their program. This student perspective was surprising, as internationally there are a growing number of student groups advocating for inter-professional education (National Health Sciences Students’ Association and its chapters) and participating in student-led inter-professional education initiatives such as primary healthcare clinics, the Healthcare Team Challenge and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement Open School. An apparent lack of appreciation for team training was also noted in an Ontario study that found that inter-professional education opportunities were the lowest-rated incentive to attract students to clinical placements in underserved areas (MacRae et al. 2007). It has been suggested, however, that students may have a limited understanding of the value of inter-professional education, possibly due to their limited exposure to such opportunities at the pre-licensure level (van Diepen et al. 2007). Dalton et al. (2003) noted that inter-professional education is most meaningful if achieved through an experiential framework, so careful thought must be given to the educational strategies used to teach collaboration.

In this survey of students’ attitudes, only 57% of students indicated a likelihood of seeking additional training in geriatrics after their program, despite the relatively high proportion of students (78%) recognizing a heavy emphasis of geriatrics in their career. This lack of interest by healthcare providers in pursuing geriatric education is not a new finding and presents one of several challenges in addressing the undersupply of workforce with the necessary skills and knowledge to care for the unique needs of older adults. Of the 12,453 residents currently enrolled in post-graduate medical training in Canada, only 38 are enrolled in geriatric programs (Busing and Gold 2009). In the United States, it was suggested that annually a meagre 3% or approximately 450 new social work graduates choose to pursue gerontological social work after graduation (Shay and Burris 2008). This indicates that post-secondary education institutions must develop innovative educational models that stimulate interest in the health and social care of older adults.

The findings from this small study provide important supportive information relevant to student attitudes to inter-professional collaboration and its potential impact on recruitment and retention and should be of interest to health system planners despite its lack of methodological rigour. Despite the small sample size of this study, the value and legitimacy of the qualitative, sometimes even anecdotal, evidence was valued by a group of decision-makers involved in a cross-Canadian series of focus groups discussing the evidence around inter-professional education and practice as long as the evidence is relevant to, and builds on, health system priorities (Burton et al. 2009). The health human resources shortage was identified in this focus group report as a key priority.

The results are also limited in that they capture and report perceived intentions to practice in collaborative environments, not actions. In a study by McNair et al. (2005), there were discrepant results between students’ high level of interest to “spend some time in a rural health setting” compared with their willingness to actually practise in the rural setting (implying more permanent rural work). The authors of this study cautioned against interpreting students’ positive attitudes toward rural healthcare and their willingness to do placements in the rural health setting as evidence that they will actually choose such environments as their long-term place of employment.

Conclusions

Though limited by its small sample size, students participating in this survey indicated a strong preference to practice on inter-professional teams and that they would seek out employment that fosters collaborative practice environments. Educational institutions and practice environments need to give thought to developing innovative ways of fostering interest and developing skills in priority areas such as geriatric care and collaborative practice. Given the current health human resources shortage in geriatric practice, an important area requiring further study is whether opportunities to practise on inter-professional collaborative teams influence graduates’ decisions regarding first place of employment in low-demand specialty areas such as geriatrics.

"Why take care of crusty old people when you can be a brain surgeon who wows his guests at dinner parties?"
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References

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