

The Interprofessional Health Mentors Program Symposium: An approach to knowledge exchange

Dr. Angela Towle, CHES Senior Scholar, writes about the symposium held on April 26, 2012 – a complement to the pilot Interprofessional Health Mentors Program which began in the 2011-2012 academic year. PHOTO CREDITS: DON ERHARDT

The Interprofessional 'Health Mentors' (HM) program is a unique educational experience in which teams of 4 students from different health disciplines learn together from and with a mentor who has a chronic illness or disability over a 16-month period. There are 23 mentors and 90 students (from dentistry, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, pharmacy and physical therapy) in the 2011-12 pilot program (refer to the [UBC Medicine Spring 2012 issue](#) for a feature on the Interprofessional Health Mentors Program, which includes details on the program structure).

The educational challenge was to design a knowledge exchange event at the end of the year where groups could share their learning in a way that encouraged creativity yet had some standardized elements and was not a make-work project at exam time. Each group was therefore asked to prepare a "tweet" (a statement comprised of 140 characters) that summarized the most important thing that they had learned. At a symposium each group had a poster board on which their tweet was displayed along with other material they chose to illustrate their learning. Selected quotes from reflective journals written by students afterwards tell the story of the symposium...



"Preparation-wise, it was not something with which I was particularly comfortable at the start. I had never had to do any presentation for which there was no format. Therefore, getting the chance to work together with the group from scratch was something very new to me... I feel like by working on this project together and deciding on what we felt was important to present and how we wanted to present it, we practiced what it means to collaborate and communicate in a professional setting. I feel like we exhibited the beginnings of characteristics of the clinicians we all strive to be – patient centered and open-minded."

[Dentistry 04]

"It was so great to see how each and every one of the groups was able to put together a poster in a short amount of time that represented in some way their experience. The

teamwork was truly outstanding, and it was a great exposure to inter-professional teamwork that will play a huge role in all of our careers as healthcare professions... My favourite part of the symposium was chatting with members from other groups. It was remarkable to see how much every person, regardless of their discipline, felt they had gotten out of the program and their experiences with their mentor.” [Medicine 12]

“I was surprised at the similarities between my group and some other groups in terms of the main idea we wanted to share. Our tweet: 'Treat the person, not just the illness' is eerily familiar with Group 20's tweet: 'There is much more to a person than their condition'. From talking to the members of Group 20, I found it interesting that groups can take markedly different routes but eventually develop almost identical conclusions. Despite their simplicity, I feel that these tweets convey powerful messages. One common theme that I noticed amongst a few groups was the idea of accepting a condition and learning to live with it, rather than feeling distressed about something we are unable to control. In particular, Group 3's tweet: "It's not the strongest who survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most adaptable to change"(Darwin) and Group 7's tweet: "Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass...it's learning to dance in the rain" (Unknown) were quite indicative of this theme, and prompted an abundance of self-reflection. I have been extremely fortunate in my life and have experienced many successes, but I seem to spend a disproportionate amount of time dwelling on my failures.” [Medicine 16]



“I think the part of the health mentors symposium that stuck out the most for me was a sense of hopefulness and excitement about the changing attitudes toward patient care and interdisciplinary collaboration in health care... Most of the projects emphasized the centrality and expertise of the patient, as well as the importance of clinicians working together to support a patient throughout their illness experience. One group nicely stated in their tweet: “the key to health is partnerships based on respecting every expert, no matter what the credentials may be.” [Nursing 32]

“The theme that stood out the most amongst all of the interdisciplinary teams was working together with the mentor. There were poster boards that were strikingly similar to each other. Two different teams use trees to symbolize this concept. On one of the teams the

roots of the tree demonstrated how the different disciplines were all part of the health mentors team and another used branches to show the same concept. Two other teams (ours included) used hands to show how the health professionals and mentors worked together."

[Nursing 39]

"Some similarities that I noted was how most groups spoke about recovery, strength, determination, and improvement. All of the tweets seemed optimistic, and they all were geared towards the future. I also noticed that the posters painted a picture of resilience and mastery; none of them spoke of victimization or passivity in the face of chronic illness."

[Occupational Therapy 65]



"Collaboration, communication, treating the client not the disease, including and recognizing that the client is the best expert of themselves as well as "we are all pieces of the puzzle coming together" metaphors were all overarching messages. In my conversation with some of the other mentors, one of them mentioned that it was reassuring that a lot of groups were coming up with the similar messages. My interpretation of these messages was that these mentors and students probably at one point or another had encountered negative experiences in the health care system where these elements weren't present. Looking at it from this standpoint, I found it almost a bit troubling that such fundamental messages that would seem like common sense for any health care professional need to be reinforced. This got me thinking about what point these messages get lost and what are the factors that lead to it. It seems easy to point fingers at staff shortages, overworked and underappreciated staff but now that I have started my first clinical placement at the hospital, I can see where these frustrations stem from. There is no simple answer to address these issues but I definitely feel that as students being exposed to these firsthand accounts is a good step towards being cognizant of these issues outside of an academia standpoint."

[Physical Therapy 89]

"After the symposium, a thought that crossed my mind was how different the event would have appeared to a different group of students. If any other non-health science faculty came across a gathering of an atrium filled with individuals suffering from chronic illnesses, they would probably be quite taken back while on the other hand these patients were our

