**Summary**

This project enhanced student learning through a unique training opportunity that enabled students to engage with a diverse group of older adults from independent living who were expert at managing their own health – in contrast to those in high care situations. This learning experience increased students’ understanding of older adults from independent living (IL) and developed students’ clinical skills in the provision of Primary Health Care (PHC). SCU’s School of Health and Human Sciences (SHHS) and Crowley Care Services worked together to enable nursing, occupational therapy (OT) and clinical exercise physiology (CEP) students to engage in an inter-professional model of clinical placements with older IL residents. These placements involved inviting older adults to attend the SCU mobile health clinic as expert patients, share their health stories and provide feedback. This process helped to develop students’ clinical and communication skills and provided an authentic student-patient interaction, within a simulated clinical environment. The project enabled opportunities for risk and resilience assessments by inter-professional teams of students, SCU workshops and training for students and Crowley workers.

Students also provided home visits for older adults, at their invitation and OT students completing two real-life projects, with benefits for Crowley and for students, in terms of their employability. The project resulted in invaluable participation of the older adults for training development in terms of students’ communication and interpersonal skills, reciprocal benefits for students and older adults in terms of getting to know and learn from each other and unique learning experiences for students in PHC provision for older adults through the validation of their lived experiences. The experience positively influenced students’ attitudes towards working with older adults and contributed to the enhancement of skills and expertise of all involved as a result of the collaboration and inter-professional approach.

**Background**

An ageing population and increasing need for quality healthcare for older adults requires that students receive specifically tailored training and develop positive attitudes towards working with older adults. A specific objective of the project was the creation of opportunities for students to engage with older adults currently managing their lives independently, contrasting with high care placement experiences.

This project addressed the need for students to experience working with a diverse range of older adults in order to develop more positive perceptions of ageing and working with older adults. Many students’ experiences of working with older adults are limited to hospitals and high care situations and this project aimed to provide students with a broader perspective. Engaging with this community of older adults in natural clinical and home settings, rather than in institutionalised environments, is important in PHC with...
its focus on health promotion and prevention. Recent aged care reforms reflect a shift to person-directed care. As a simulated learning activity, students gained valuable experience interacting with IL residents, who had an opportunity to actively contribute to the training development of future healthcare workers. As no treatment was offered by the students, this simulated activity offered a safe environment in which to develop skills and gain confidence.

Exposure to such learning experiences demonstrated the diversity that exists among older adults and effectively challenged ageist stereotypes that impact negatively on the provision of care. The project validated older adults’ knowledge and lived experiences of PHC, providing a wealth of valuable information to inform clinical training. This community engaged learning activity provided relevant, authentic training for health students.

In addition, in response to the Living Longer, Living Better Aged Care Reforms (2013), this project recognised the need for older Australians to remain actively engaged with their communities and to have greater autonomy in their healthcare. Having a risk and resilience assessment of so many in the community provides helpful markers to Crowley in terms of future demand and provision of services. The community were introduced to healthcare services that they may not have encountered before, such as CEP and OT. This knowledge will assist the community in their choices of healthcare provision. This project was possible due to funding made available by Health Workforce Australia.

**Outcomes**

The project outcomes included: the completion of a two OT reports: a task analysis of staff in the residence and a risk and resilience assessment of IL residents; and a greater appreciation by students of the diversity of older adults and an improved understanding of PHC “to ‘see’ older people from a perspective of health rather than disease or disability” (Whenua Oner, Crowley).

The older adults’ life experience was acknowledged and validated through the sharing of health stories and feedback on the patient-student experience, were active contributors to training development. The inter-professional teamwork model enabled nursing, OT, and CEP students to work and train together, giving them greater understanding of the contribution that each profession makes to the healthcare of older adults. Students enjoyed “finding out [about] other disciplines” and “bouncing off each other” during placements.

Crowley’s continued support for the grant’s extension is evidence of the partnership forged. These outcomes are significant for the future of healthcare in Australia, because of an increasingly ageing population whose health needs must be addressed. The outcomes demonstrate the benefits of enhancing the education and training experience of our future health workers, and the value of forging collaborations.

**Learning**

Well designed and structured community engaged learning activities can change attitudes and counteract negative stereotypes. This is evidenced by students’ increased appreciation of the wisdom, resilience and diversity that exists among older adults. A positive outlook towards working with older populations will serve them well in their future careers. In addition, this activity highlighted the willingness and generosity of older adults to contribute to positive outcomes for student training. Their contribution in terms of their time and engagement with students on issues relating to their health and wellbeing is invaluable. The positive affect resulting from the encounters between students and their older ‘patients’ was wonderful to witness and the reciprocal enjoyment of each other enriched the experience for both students and older adults. This draws attention to a fundamental social issue for all stakeholders involved; the value and benefits of inviting older adults to participate in such projects. Ultimately, it is important that communities are engaged in the vital decisions that impact on their health and well-being.

**Impact**

Students showed increased appreciation of the diversity and resilience of older adults; greater recognition of the psychological differences between residents in IL and those in residential care; more positive attitudes towards working with older adults. One student commented, “I’ve only ever seen elderly who were in high care, I’ve never seen women that old that fit”. These benefits are likely to impact positively on students’ future clinical practice.

The older adults loved the interaction with students and felt validated for their input and contribution to training development. One participant said her participation made her feel like she was “on a cloud” and it was “just lovely to be with the young people and for them to be interested in me”. The older adults’ engagement with
students was “on their own terms, which was quite empowering for the residents” (Oner).

Crowley benefitted from the involvement with the students and the staff training provided by SCU. Oner commented that both the “staff and residents benefitted from the energy and ‘can do’ attitude of the students”. One Crowley worker said it was “overwhelming” what she’d learned. Another commented how “rewarding” the experience had been for her.

**Recognition**

This project was the recipient of the 2013 Excellence in Community Engagement Award for Community Engaged Learning.

**Awards Category**

Community Engaged Learning.

**Good practice principles**

Reciprocity, patient centred care, engaged learning, partnership, trust, respect.

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