Students’ experience of prison health education during medical school

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Abstract

Background: Social responsibility and accountability can be important core values in medical education. At the University of British Columbia, undergraduate medical students engage in prison health community service-learning opportunities in regional correctional facilities.

Methods: To describe the impact of prison health exposure on pre-clinical medical students, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with individuals who had participated in a prison health medical education program. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and interpretive descriptive methods were used to inductively derive thematic findings to describe students’ experiences.

Results: Major themes emerged as students reported how (1) exposure to incarcerated populations increases students’ insight into issues that diverse marginalized sub-populations encounter; (2) positive interactions with the incarcerated individuals enhances relationship building; (3) collaboration reinforces teamwork skills and (4) community placements garner important learning opportunities within the medical school curriculum.

Conclusions: Our findings demonstrated that pre-clinical exposure to incarcerated individuals and prison health education provided a unique setting for medical students to develop an increased sense of social responsibility and accountability.

Background

Community-based service learning projects offer an opportunity for students to work in a community setting while “placing equal emphasis on student learning and the provision of meaningful community service” to diverse sub-populations (Cashman & Seifer 2008). Dharamsi et al. (2010a) reported that community service-learning (CSL) projects enable medical students to gain better insight into the social determinants of health through first-hand interactions with marginalized populations. Service learning aims to increase students’ awareness of community programs or populations while fostering social responsibility among future health care providers (Hunt et al. 2011); as defined by Faulkner and McCurdy (2000), a socially responsible individual is “a person who takes part in activities that can contribute to the happiness, health and prosperity of a community and its members.” Social accountability focuses on responding to the diverse health care needs of the communities a physician serves, including delivering health care to its underserved populations (Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada 2009). Unfortunately, some medical students experience a decline in empathy towards patients and underserved populations throughout medical school (Crandal et al. 2007). To address this, some medical school curriculums purposely integrate social awareness experiences as a means to increasing social responsibility and accountability of future physicians (Dharamsi et al. 2010a).

The Canadian Medical Education Direction for Specialists or “CanMEDS” is a competency framework that designates seven roles in which health care provider proficiency garners optimal health outcomes (Frank & Jabbour 2005). The service learning project incorporates several of these roles, including Communicator, Collaborator, Professional and Health Advocate: all of which are considered essential attributes for physicians (Frank & Jabbour 2005). Increased social responsibility assists medical students to “develop, or have reinforced, such qualities as reliability, trustworthiness, dependability, altruism and compassion” (Faulkner & McCurdy 2000).

Prison facilities are a unique setting for medical students to do both clinical electives and service learning projects. Incarcerated men and women have unique health care needs including psychiatric disorders, poorly managed chronic conditions and infectious disease such as HIV and hepatitis C (Gilmore 1999; National Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS 2007).

Practice points

- Non-clinical service learning opportunities in correctional facilities create an unique avenue for development of social responsibility.
- Exposure to incarcerated populations increases students’ insight into issues that diverse marginalized sub-populations encounter.
- CSL projects provide valuable reciprocal learning opportunities.
- The creation and presentation of population-specific health education modules demonstrates student competencies in both the Collaborator and Communicator roles.
Methods

Study design, sample and recruitment

This qualitative study used interpretive descriptive methodology (Thorne 2008) to describe how medical students' experiences of working with a marginalized sector of society through prison health projects increases their awareness of social accountability and responsibility. University ethics approval was obtained and potential participants (medical students who participated in the CSLO Prison Health project between 2007 and 2012) were contacted with an emailed invitation letter. Participant inclusion criterion was restricted to medical students who, as undergraduate medical students, had worked in the prison system to collaboratively design and present health education modules for incarcerated men and women. Invitation emails were sent to 35 potential participants; a convenience sample comprising the initial participant respondents to the invitation email was used and each participant signed a consent form.

Data collection

Semi-structured, individual, in-depth telephone interviews were conducted and digitally recorded. The first author (HF) conducted the interviews. Participants were asked to describe their involvement in the prison health education project. An interview guide was used to prompt participants to explain previous exposure to, and perceptions of marginalized populations in highlighting what resonated most with them about working with individuals within the correctional facilities. Participants also shared their opinions about the benefits of having medical students work with incarcerated individuals amid discussing their personal experiences and predicted impact on their future practice as a physician. The interview questions were based on published literature reviews that focused on important aspects of experiential learning (Littlewood et al. 2005; Gashman & Seifer 2008; Dharamsi et al. 2010b). Interviews lasted 20–35 minutes, and were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Each transcript was assigned an ID number and all identifiers were removed from the transcript. Though minimal risk, counseling services were available for study participants should any distress have been experienced as a result of their participation in the interview. Additionally, participants completed a short survey via an online Canadian-based survey program, Fluidsurveys™ to provide individual demographic data; survey data was not linked to interview data.

Data analysis

All interview transcripts were open coded, line by line to identify emergent and convergent topics arising from the data. As interviews and analysis proceeded, thematic saturation was reached with 10 interviews. Codes containing similar content were clustered together to create categories, and as data analysis continued some categories were subsumed. Themes were inductively derived through consensus building processes among the co-authors. Specifically, the authors examined recurring categories and ideas across the interviews as a means to identifying and labeling “themes and patterns within subjective perceptions” (Thorne 2000). Co-authors reviewed the transcripts independently and then met to review themes and discuss any varying opinions or views that may have arisen. Thematic patterns were inductively derived through these analytic processes to describe how medical students’ experiences of working with a vulnerable, marginalized sector of society through prison health projects created a subjective increase in social responsibility.

Results

Four main themes emerged through analysis of students’ experiences: (1) exposure to incarcerated men and women increases students’ insight into issues and challenges that marginalized sub-populations may encounter; (2) positive interactions with the incarcerated individuals enhances relationship building; (3) collaboration reinforces teamwork skills.
and (4) community placements garner important learning opportunities within the medical school curriculum.

Exposure to incarcerated men and women increases students’ insight into issues and challenges that marginalized sub-populations may encounter.

The most prominent theme revealed participants’ subjective perception of an increased insight into the issues and challenges of diverse populations that, previously, students had limited, if any direct experience with. Through the project, students indicated that each interaction with seminar participants allowed them to discover characteristics of the several distinct sub-groups within the prison population.

The value of having prison health as part of medical school is that it exposes you to more or less every marginalized population you could imagine. It’s the immigrants, it’s women, it’s homelessness, it’s aboriginal, it’s drug addicted…

Participants described learning from the incarcerated individuals during the presentations despite their expectations that they would fulfill a teaching role. Through listening to the stories and questions from the audience, students reported that they gained insights into the various knowledge levels of inmates, and many study participants expressed a newfound appreciation for the “diversity of [incarcerated individuals'] understanding of health.” Also, students noted an increased awareness of the numerous misconceptions present regarding personal health care. For example, many inmates had misinformation regarding how to make a doctors appointment or how HIV was transmitted whereas others were quite informed about health care systems and services. One participant suggested:

It was kind of a two-way street because we were giving the presentation and we were also learning about what people knew and didn’t know about the health care system.

Furthermore, many students reported learning the importance of adapting presentations to the audience to facilitate communication and maximize learning. Students stated that the interactions with the incarcerated individuals during the presentations helped them learn how to appropriately disseminate information and “adjust [their] communication” to reach specific attendees – an important transferable skill for future practice as a health care provider.

Several students stated that exposure to the diverse issues and challenges faced by people who are incarcerated provided a greater level of insight into many social issues. One participant predicted his/her undergraduate experiences ensured “that initial bit of judgment won’t be there” while another participant explained:

There’s a federal prison here, just down the street actually and so having experienced prison medicine in undergrad, it, it’s no longer intimidating because we experienced it and learned more about it and came to respect it.

Positive interactions with the incarcerated individuals enhances relationship building.

During the presentations in the correctional facilities, students perceived a warm welcome from the audience comprising of incarcerated individuals. Students expressed surprise at how eager and receptive the audience members were to learning from the students.

We got really good feedback from the inmates themselves. They seemed really happy to have us there and that positive interaction was something we’d hoped to foster.

In many ways, the interaction with the men and women in the correctional facilities provided an opportunity to build a positive relationship between the incarcerated persons and “a group of young people, about to enter the medical field.” Ideally, these interactions would improve future relationships between individuals with incarceration experience and health care providers. One participant emphasized that an important aspect of enhancing relationships includes addressing one’s own stigma and preconceived ideas:

So I think I developed a sense of compassion for a group of people that I didn’t previously understand as well. Hopefully that makes me a better physician for that.

Collaboration reinforces teamwork skills.

Throughout the project, students liaised with their medical student colleagues, faculty members, prison administration through correctional services and on-site prison guards. The opportunities to work with “social workers, nurses [and] prison guards” were seen by students as chances to work in a team and proved to be “very collaborative.” The medical students also worked together as a team to fulfill their teaching role during the presentations. Students stressed the importance of “knowing [their] role” on the team and ensuring that their presentations were interactive and engaging. A few students also stated they gained an appreciation for what it is like to work in an unfamiliar system – specifically a forensics system and the challenges and barriers that affect teamwork in these settings. Additionally, some students described similarities between the stressful situations they encountered in the prisons and hospital wards. As one student stated:

…hospitals can be very stressful working environments and things need to be respected in order for procedures to go smoothly and it’s the same thing in prison. I think it prepares one for working in any other team environment.

Community placements garner important learning opportunities within the medical school curriculum.

The impact of experiential learning was demonstrated to students as they interacted with incarcerated men and women and experienced first hand how the incarcerated persons
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"broke the stereotypes" that many students expected from watching shows on "TV land." As one student explained:

It's not something you could learn in a textbook. We have presentations in <school course> about different marginalized populations but you can't really learn about it...its only through interacting with the people that you can break down the stereotypes that you have and start to feel more comfortable

In addition to building a positive rapport with the inmates, students found that, overall, they felt comfortable and safe in the prison environment which is something many students previously worried about due to many stereotypes regarding the safety of correctional facilities.

Students felt that their learning experience in the correctional facilities was a beneficial supplement to traditional lecture-based curriculums in the pre-clinical years of medical school. Students were self-motivated to research answers when unable to answer questions posed by audience members during the presentation.

It gave me a concrete experience to go with what I have learned in class. Information became applicable when explaining sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing in a women's correctional facility, after learning about STIs in lecture and textbooks.

At time of interview, participants' level of medical education training ranged from second-year undergraduate to first-year post-graduate residency, with at least one interview participant in each level of training (Table 1).

**Table 1. Distribution of self-reported demographic factors of male and female interview participants (N = 10).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female (N = 5)</th>
<th>Male (N = 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female (N = 5)</td>
<td>Male (N = 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age at time of interview (years)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother has university education (N = 9)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father has university education (N = 9)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian citizen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth location was ruralb</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised in urban location</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous experience working with marginalized populations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a Data missing from one interview participant.
b Rural is a community with population less than 12,000.

“...faced the challenges faced by the prisons' diverse populations. Awareness of the concerns of different populations is intricately connected to the social accountability of the Health Advocate component of the CanMED competencies (Frank & Jabbour 2005). Students reported an increased awareness of their target population through the CSLO projects and described feeling better equipped to interact with marginalized individuals in the health care field in the future.

Students reported surprise at how their experience in the correctional facilities was truly a reciprocal learning process. Students entered the project with the expectation of “teaching” the health educational modules; however, many of the medical students learned more than they had expected from the incarcerated individuals. Through stories, questions and group discussion, students reported gaining insights into some of the social issues of the inmates’ lives, issues which consequently affect health outcomes. The reciprocal learning process has been reported by Dharmasi et al. (2010b) as an outcome of CSLO projects – specifically community members and dental students, were able to learn from each other while collaborating on a community-based service learning project. The value of this reciprocal learning suggests medical schools might benefit from systematically incorporating such learning opportunities into curriculums.
Students also incorporated problem-based learning (PBL) pedagogies into the seminars in the correctional facilities. Many medical schools use a PBL approach in the pre-clinical years to challenge students to work through cases either in a lecture or tutorial setting (Dolmans et al. 2005). Barrows (1986) proposed taxonomy to classify PBL methods, including a method labeled “case method” where discussion is facilitated by the teacher but interactive for both the teacher and students. Through the prison health education projects, medical students themselves embodied PBL “case methods” as participant interviews suggested that much of the student learning came through the facilitation of conversations and discussions with incarcerated individuals.

Additionally, our results are consistent with the literature showing that correctional facilities offer a unique setting for medical students to interact with at-risk populations. Several opportunities around North America exist for health care students to gain experience working in correctional facilities (Alemagno et al. 2004; Provident & Joyce-Gaguzis 2005; McGarry et al. 2008). Almengo et al. (2004) reported a diverse range of pathologies that students encountered in the correctional facility clinical setting as well as diverse populations. Kaufman et al. (1979) described the unique educational experience in correctional facilities, as there were consistently a wide variety of medical problems and truly introduced the “complexities of primary health care problems” to medical students.

Kaufman et al. (1979) stated that exposure to the different populations within the prisons decreased stigma towards incarcerated individuals as well as increased interest in considering prison medicine as a future career option. Physicians’ own stereotypes about their patients can have a significant impact on clinical care (Wear & Kuczewski 2008). A theme arising from our interviews showed that students felt able to break down the stereotypes from “TV land” that they had encountered and to acknowledge these stereotypes during medical school training. Hopefully this will be an impactful experience that will affect doctor-patient interactions in future practice.

The small convenience sample is a limitation to this study. While 33 medical students have participated in the prison health education project since it began, 10 students were interviewed. There were likely certain factors that prompted each medical student to self-select to participate in the prison health project and subsequent interviews; however, these factors were not directly solicited from participants. Ideally, the CSL project at UBC will expand to allow more medical students to participate in gaining similar exposure during medical school. Future work includes potential expansion to other Canadian medical schools to implement similar prison-based projects into their medical school curriculum.

**Conclusion**

This study supports non-clinical service-learning educational opportunities as an avenue for medical students to develop a sense of social responsibility and more. Students’ interaction with incarcerated individuals can contribute to the development of social awareness among future health care providers.

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**Glossary**

**Socially responsible individual:** A person who takes part in activities that can contribute to the happiness, health and prosperity of a community and its members.

**Social accountability:** Focuses on responding to the diverse health care needs of the communities a physician serves, including delivering health care to its underserved populations.

**Professionalism:** Adherence to a set of values comprising both a formally agreed-upon code of conduct and the informal expectations of colleagues, clients and society. The key values include acting in a patient’s interest, responsiveness to the health needs of society, maintaining the highest standards of excellence on the practice of medicine and in the generation and dissemination of knowledge. For full definition see: http://www.mededworld.org/Glossary.aspx

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**References**


