Community based medical education as a driver for enhancing intra-professional communication skills for medical students

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Abstract

Patients rely on the way that doctors communicate with one another to facilitate and maximise their care. The community based setting serves as an ideal learning environment for medical students to monitor this interaction and enhance intra-professional communication skills. Should this vital area of communication become an active part of the undergraduate medical curriculum?

Keywords: Community-based education; Communication skills

Personal view

It seems that the patient exists in two spheres of medicine: community based care and hospital based care. They move between the two, but the transition is not always smooth. As doctors we aim to practice patient-centred care. We work under the principle of how we can provide the greatest benefit to our patients and we advocate for them.

However, when we cast our patients out from the domain we know well, into another sphere of medicine, we hope they will follow a smooth and clearly marked path. We do so with a written or verbal communication accompanying them, the contents of which may vary greatly. We hope that this communication will serve as a guide, carry the relevant message to the intended recipient and answer questions for healthcare providers and patients. Breakdown in this communication mechanism can lead to frustration for the patient and for the healthcare provider. It can also increase the potential for patient harm.

Medical students are experiencing a greater emphasis on learning communication skills within the consultation. Community based learning provides the perfect setting to observe the impact of communication within the profession and on its outcome for patients. Primary care doctors are generally more readily accessible to patients.
than hospital based doctors and as such are more likely to hear patient reports regarding their health management. Encouraging medical students to actively monitor this during their community attachment is invaluable. It promotes reflection and can only enhance the profession over time. It naturally follows that the student can carry these considerations back into their hospital attachments and develop them further throughout each component of the curriculum.

Such an activity also helps to provide relevance to the student who is not considering a career in the community. It provides insight into how they can continue to further benefit their patient's transition from one medical domain into another.

A potential study aid for developing intra-professional communication skills for the medical student in the community setting is suggested below.

**Learning resource**

A learning resource for a community-based medical student attachment might read as follows:

Use this attachment to think how you might best

- **Communicate from primary care to secondary care, or from secondary care to primary care, to provide the best service for your patient.** Think about what you might put into discharge summaries to make information transfer smoother. What does the GP need to know and how soon do they need to know it after the patient has left hospital? Think about how best to write a referral letter to a specialist – how can you ensure that you get an answer to the question that you want a response to?
- **Utilise other services outside the hospital setting to best help your patient.** Do you know how to make contact with these services? How can these services play a role in managing chronic disease and how does the primary care team set this up? Knowledge of this process can help you advise your patients and your colleagues when they transition from the hospital setting back into the community.
- **Reduce patients' frustration during their route through the healthcare system.** Patients can have long waits to see specialists. You will no doubt hear them talk about this in the primary care setting. When they get to see a specialist, how could you maximise their experience to ensure their questions/concerns/expectations are met? How do you establish these concerns and expectations in the first place?
- **Maximise the use of telemedicine.** Telemedicine has created an opportunity for community and hospital-based doctors to both be present in the consultation with their patient. How could you as a doctor best improve the structure of this brief interaction to maximise information transfer?

**Take Home Messages**

- The community based setting serves as an ideal learning environment for medical students to enhance intra-professional communication skills.
- Good intra-professional communication enhances patient safety.

**Notes On Contributors**
Dr Jane Hampson is a General Practitioner in Launceston, Tasmania, Australia, and a supervisor of medical students and GP Registrars.

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Bibliography/References

Appendices

Declarations

The author has declared that there are no conflicts of interest.

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