

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

# Building Professional Qualities Through A Community Placement Programme For Medical Students

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### Abstract

The community placement programme was first introduced to our medical students in 2007. The objectives of this community service programme are to enable students to explore and understand the importance of various skills such as leadership, teamwork and interest towards community services, as well as to improve their skills in those areas for becoming better students and future doctors. The first year medical students were tasked to plan, organize and implement activities in selected communities such as disabled people, orphans, neglected elderly, the poor, HIV positive single mothers and children. Amongst the activities conducted were sharing experiences and thoughts, games, donation and 'gotong-royong'. The objective of this study was to evaluate the students' perception on the successfulness of the community placement programme in building their professional qualities. A cross-sectional study was conducted among the first year medical students using a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of 5 elements of professional qualities such as leadership and team work skills, interest towards community services, volunteerism and empathy. Self-reflection sessions were also held to explore the learning points gained. A total of 147 students answered the questionnaires. The students rated the overall programme as highly useful (80.6%) and as achieving the objectives (80.1%). They perceived that this programme helped them to improve their personal and professional skills such as leadership (70.0%), team work (71.4%), interest towards community services (87.1%), volunteerism (85.0%), and empathy (89.1%). Self-reflection revealed that the programme made them realize the role of doctors in a community, appreciate the spirit of teamwork and helped them to understand the need of vulnerable groups. As a conclusion, this programme was well-accepted and perceived as assisting medical students to build professional qualities to become caring and competent doctors.

**Keywords:** Professional qualities, community placement, medical student.

## Introduction

Medical training must be holistic in its approach and can no longer emphasise on building up knowledge alone. Professional qualities such as leadership, communication skills, professionalism and teamwork are the other important elements of medical education. The importance of promoting and nurturing positive professional qualities among future doctors is becoming more apparent within healthcare. Many studies have shown that it has effects on the quality of care provided. The community placement programme has been introduced as part of the Student Personal and Professional Development Programme (SPPDP). The objective of this study was to evaluate the students' perception on the successfulness of the community placement programme in building their professional qualities

## Description of the programme

Community placement programme was developed to enhance students' self-awareness of the importance of the formation of positive personal and professional qualities to become a caring doctor as well as to assist them in developing self-improvement strategies to develop their personal qualities. A "hands-on" activity is thought to be an alternative approach to lecture-based teaching in this area of concern. The programme was run over one month, with the objectives to enable students to explore various skills such as leadership, teamwork and community services, to understand the importance of those skills and to develop self-improvement strategies in improving those skills for becoming better students as well as future doctors. They were given the task in small groups of ten students to plan, organize and implement activities in selected communities such as the disabled, orphans and other unfortunate groups. Amongst the activities conducted were sharing experiences and thoughts, games, donation and 'gotong-royong'. Each group was supervised by an academic lecturer. Discussion sessions were

held to explore the learning experience gained from this programme. After going through the programme, they should be able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, and develop their own self-improvement strategies to strengthen their personal and professional skills in the future.

## Methodology

A cross-sectional study was conducted among the first year medical students involved in the community placement programme in 2009. All students involved were included. Self-administered questionnaire was used to assess the perception of students regarding the success of the community placement programme in building their professional qualities at the end of the programme. The evaluation questionnaire consisted of 5 elements of professional qualities such as leadership and teamwork, interest towards community services, volunteerism and empathy. The items were rated using a Likert-scale. The respondents were requested to rate the items given in the questionnaire using the responses 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'uncertain', 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. The Likert-scale scores range from 1 for 'strongly disagree' to 5 for 'strongly agree'. Self-reflection sessions were also held to explore the learning points gained.

## Results

A total of 147 students answered the questionnaires. The students rated the overall programme as highly useful (80.6%) and as achieving the objectives (80.1%). They perceived that this programme helped them to improve their personal and professional skills such as leadership (70.0%), team work (83.6%), interest towards community services (87.1%), volunteerism (85.0%), and empathy (89.1%). The self-reflection revealed that the programme made them realize the role of doctors in a community, appreciate the spirit of teamwork and helped them to understand the need of vulnerable groups.

## Discussions

The ultimate aim of medical education is to produce a 'good doctor' who is able to provide excellent medical care to patients under his care. However, the concept of what constitutes a good doctor remains nebulous and ill-defined. Besides being highly knowledgeable, having good professional qualities was the important element expected by the public from a doctor (1). Doctor-patient interaction is a key to medical education in any context. Community oriented learning enables students to participate, in a meaningful way in the doctor-patient/public interaction (2). It also improves the preventive and continuity aspects of care (3). The aim of our community placement programme, a form of community oriented learning is to build up and enhance medical students' professional qualities. Majority of students gave positive feedback that the community service activities assisted them in building their professional qualities. The programme helps the students to instill the humanistic qualities such as caring and empathy. Social responsibility was also built up where the students realized that they understood and became closer to the people in need. In addition, important skills such as leadership and team work skills were also nurtured as they have to plan and organize the activities themselves.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, this programme is well-accepted and perceived as assisting medical students to build professional qualities for becoming caring and competent doctors.

## Acknowledgement

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