

Learning and living together: a rural immersion program for medical and allied health students

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Associate Professor Amanda Barnard is Associate Dean of the School of General Practice, Rural and Indigenous Health at the Australian National University Medical School, and Foundation Head of the Rural Clinical School since its inception in 2006. She directs an innovative rural health program across all years of the medical course, with student rural clinical placements in all years. The program integrates short and year long student placements over the south-east NSW region. The program is based on multiple partnerships scaffolding student learning in a wide variety of settings, and it won the 2009 Australian Learning and Teaching Award for a Program that Enhances Learning.

Amanda's academic interests lie in medical education and the changing demands and nature of the primary care workforce, particularly in chronic disease. She has a particular interest in asthma and is Chair of the Guidelines Committee for the 2012 Asthma Management Handbook. She is interested in how to prepare students for effective team based care, and this led to the development of a combined Rural Week program with allied health students from the University of Canberra.

Amanda also works as a GP in Braidwood, a small town in NSW, and is Chair of the Wonca Working Party on Women and Family Medicine.

Aims

New ways of practice demand new ways of learning. Can a multidisciplinary rural immersion program, with students working together on a community-based project, lead to changes in attitudes and perceptions that may positively influence future teamwork?

Methods

This paper presents the evaluations from four years of a combined 'Rural Week' program, in which medical and allied health students (pharmacy, physiotherapy or dietetics) from two universities, spend a week together in a small rural town. Students work with key members of community groups (identified by the rural communities) to explore the broad health issues and needs of that group and how those health needs of the communities are met (or not met), and reflect on the perspectives and inputs from their own disciplinary backgrounds. Pre- and post-Rural Week questionnaires are completed, recording students' attitudes to and perceptions of both other disciplines and the challenges of interdisciplinary learning and work. The questionnaires use Likert scale and open responses. The questionnaires were analysed using SPSS, and open responses coded by themes

Relevance

The relevance of this project lies in its capacity to provide a positive rural experience for students from different disciplines that promotes genuine teamwork and an enhanced understanding of both other professions and rural communities. It introduces students to working together in a rural community, focusing on broad health issues and the experiences of community residents, not just clinical issues. The broad focus of their work prompts deep reflection.

Results

Analysis of over 350 responses shows positive changes in understanding of, and attitudes towards, other health professional groups. Positive changes occurred in the confidence and perceived competence of students when interacting with students and practitioners of other health professions. Students more frequently reported feeling high levels of respect for, as well as from, other professions, and fewer stated they felt misunderstood by other professions, after the Rural Week experience. The experience prompted a number of student-led activities and projects between the institutions and disciplines.

Conclusion

Students from different health disciplines learnt about, and from, each other during an immersion Rural Week, and demonstrated changes in understanding and attitudes about each discipline. These have had further outcomes in sustained student-led joint activities, and a suggestion of positive outcome on rural work choices.