Dental Education @ GU: An Authentic Approach

Professor Ratilal Laloo, Ms Jane Evans and Ms Leonie Short
School of Dentistry and Oral Health, Griffith University

Introduction
Work integrated learning (WIL), from Groenewald’s (2004) point of view is “a structured strategy integrating classroom studies with learning through productive work experiences in a field related to a student’s academic or career goals.” Dentistry, Oral Health Therapy and Dental Technology students at Griffith University have throughout their education at Griffith University School of Dentistry and Oral Health. Exposure to the ‘real world of work’ commences in first year second semester where students attend work placements within the public and private health sector. In further years the students complete simple to complex cases within the Griffith Health oral health clinical setting. In this setting the students are working collaboratively on patient cases, learning and working from and with each other to treat whole families. These activities have provided students with positive collaborative interactions within the dental community. Therefore quietly building ‘communities of practice’, as prescribed by Wenger, Dermott and Snyder (2002), where groups of students who share a concern for patients’ needs and the community expand their knowledge and apply their skills in the community setting. Students then bring these skills to the clinical environment on and off-campus where they continue to develop their attitudes, knowledge and skills to complete complex patient cases.

Community Dental Project
The dental clinic comprises 4 dental surgeries, three equipped with portable equipment.
So far in 2009 six groups of students (4 groups of 8 students and 2 groups of six) have each spent 3-weeks in Brewarrina.
In this time about 1300 appointments have been filled.
The students submit a reflective journal on this experience as part of the assessment of their clinical outplacement module.
They also voluntarily and anonymously submit a standardised feedback form.

Perspectives
Student Perspectives
Comments generally highlighted the opportunity for extensive clinical exposure; treating an array of dental conditions, especially in children; building clinical confidence and learning to work independently.
Comments less often stated related to the opportunities to provide a much-needed and appreciated service; getting to know the community and appreciating the health problems and difficulties confronting this rural, remote and Indigenous community. They were also very happy with the accommodation and housekeeping provided, and the opportunity to socialise with fellow class-mates and the community.

Patient Perspectives
Comments from patients included how great it was that they did not have to travel so far to the dentist and that the students were very professional and explained in detail what would happen during the consultation.
Overall, patients were impressed by the level of service.

Community Engagement
A feature of studying one of the suites of dentistry, oral health therapy or dental technology programs at Griffith University is students have the opportunity to work collaboratively in a variety of settings.
One such example is the inclusion of the rural and remote clinical outplacement for final year dental students which started in February 2009. This placement is in partnership with the Brewarrina Shire Council, Greater Western Area Health Service and Ochre Health Group, and funded by a Commonwealth Grant for Dental Training – Expanding Rural Placements Program. Further funding to build capacity is also provided by the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Fund.
The oral health therapy and dental technology students will be included in the coming years as the partnership evolves.

Conclusion
After a short amount of time into the program, it is pleasing to see the community embracing the concept and that most of the students have been very positive about this clinical placement in a rural and remote setting.
Continuous evaluation of the outcomes from the project will see it evolve to meet the educational and health needs of all the stakeholders in the program.

References

For More Information On…
Rural, Remote and Indigenous Oral Health Dental Clinic Placement

Contact
Professor Ratilal Laloo
Colgate Chair: Rural, Remote & Indigenous Oral Health, School of Dentistry & Oral Health, Griffith University, QLD 4222. Phone: (07) 567 80746; r.lalloo@griffith.edu.au

Acknowledgements
Brewarrina Shire Council, Greater Western Area Health Service and Ochre Health Group, Commonwealth Grant for Dental Training–Expanding Rural Placements Program, Rio Tinto Aboriginal Fund.