Cultural competence versus ‘clinical tourism’

Background: Nursing practice in Australia requires that students have a sound understanding of cultural awareness, sensitivity and safety which form the underpinning of most nursing curricula. International clinical placement is known to assist with the development of cultural competence. However, the notion of ‘clinical tourism’ indicates otherwise, suggesting that health professionals from developed countries take vacations that use international clinical placements as observational exercises rather than developing links with the local community.

Aim: To examine the learning experiences related to cultural competence versus ‘clinical tourism’ in undergraduate nursing students during an international clinical placement in rural Thailand.

Method: Fifteen students successfully met selection criteria to participate in this third year community placement. Three weeks were spent in community and hospital settings undertaking health education and promotion activities and delivery of clinical care. Data were collected from pre- and post-placement focus groups, journals and student evaluations.

Findings: Early student apprehensions were short lived and quickly replaced with excitement and enthusiasm for new learning experiences. Despite the initial novelty and notion of ‘clinical tourism’, students reported new understanding of self, nursing practices and an improved sense of social consciousness and cultural awareness.

Conclusion: Whilst most students felt they had grown professionally and personally they were left with the dilemma of how to integrate this new found understanding of cultural competence into their nursing practices in Australia. A further study is planned to explore teaching strategies to support student learning and development of cultural competence as they moved beyond ‘clinical tourism’.