Focal points

• Little is known about what competencies preceptors expect pharmacy students undertaking experiential placements to display or how these expectations align with curricula.

• Preceptors expect students to display high levels of professional behaviour and counselling skills.

• To ensure work readiness pharmacy education should focus on these skills both within universities and during experiential training.

Background

Experiential placements allow students to acquire knowledge, skills and attributes in the work setting, apply theory to practice, clarify career directions, become “work literate” and develop a professional identity.1 At Griffith University, fourth year pharmacy students undertake ten weeks of placement, where each week they participate in one day of experiential training in a community pharmacy overseen by a preceptor. Preceptors are registered pharmacists who mentor and coach students, assisting them to develop skills and values.1 To make the best of this experience, students need to be well prepared, however, little is known of preceptor expectations or how they align with curricula.

Methods

Course profiles were mapped and literature searched to identify competencies, i.e. areas of knowledge, skills and attributes that students should display while on placement. This information was prioritised and augmented through interviews with preceptors and used to develop a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked preceptors to rate competencies on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 no level of competence expected, 10 complete competence expected). There were also two open ended questions: one to identify competencies that may have been overlooked and one to identify the areas where students should show the most growth during placement. The questionnaire was piloted on two preceptors.

All 143 pharmacies that had recently been involved with Griffith fourth year students on placement were telephoned and asked if the preceptor was willing to complete the questionnaire which was administered over the telephone, faxed or e-mailed based on the preceptor’s preference. Pharmacists who chose to complete the emailed or faxed questionnaire were supplied with an information sheet and given a date to respond by. Two reminder emails were sent.

SPSS version 17.0 was used to analyse results. Ethical approval was obtained from Griffith University’s ethics committee.
Results

The questionnaire was completed by 43 (30%) respondents, 16 (37%) of whom were female. The average age was 32 years (range 24–55) and 37 (86%) had been a preceptor for less than ten years. Ability to act ethically and professionally including maintaining confidentiality 9.3 ± 1.0 (mean ± SD) was the most important competency, followed by the skill of communication, including verbal and non-verbal, 8.1 ± 1.2, while knowledge and application of community pharmacy clinical services, e.g. National Diabetes Services Scheme, Webster packing and blood pressure monitoring, 5.2 ± 1.7 was the least important. Additional attributes identified by the open ended question were grooming, punctuality and willingness to learn.

Counselling and communication skills, dispensing and product knowledge were the competencies that preceptors expected the most improvement in as a result of placement.

Discussion

The expected competencies mapped well with the course profiles and the importance placed on them was consistent amongst preceptors. This consistency is reassuring as it is likely to be linked to a universal understanding of the role of a pharmacist. Professional behaviours and the ability to communicate with patients are central to this role; however, given the expected improvement in the latter during placement it would seem that experience adds greatly to communication theory, and the role playing and oral examinations undertaken by students during their programme. The lower importance given to clinical services may be due to the fact that these services are not offered by all pharmacies.

Reference

1. Owen S, Stupans I. Experiential Placements in Pharmacy: Quality Indicators for Best Practice Approaches to Experiential Placements in Pharmacy Programs. Carrick Institute, University of South Australia; 2008