



Teaching medical students – what's in it for teachers?



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The term 'doctor' comes from the Latin 'docere' meaning 'to teach'. Although few general practitioners have formal teaching skills or qualifications, we are all involved in teaching patients every day. The importance of our role as educators has been recognised for a long time, with the first statements of the Hippocratic Oath dealing with respect for our teachers and our duty to pass our knowledge on to others.

What are the benefits of teaching?

General practitioners who teach identify the following benefits:

- the opportunity to review and improve their basic knowledge and clinical skills
- the opportunity to hear about the latest developments in medical practice
- a sense of fulfilment and of 'giving something back' to the profession
- a decreased sense of professional isolation
- the high regard of patients for doctors who teach (and for teaching practices)
- access to university facilities such as library, on-line resources and education sessions
- the development of skills that can lead to a better doctor-patient communication
- added variety to the working day, and
- it's fun!

As well as benefits to individual GPs who teach, there are clear benefits to the discipline as a whole. Students who are provided with positive experiences in general practice as undergraduates may be more likely to consider general practice as a career option. This is important given the current GP shortages, especially in outer urban and rural areas. Teaching medical students in the practice is a way for GPs to help in addressing these workforce issues for the future.

Of course, there are benefits to students who learn in general practice as well. Departments of general practice are being asked to provide more teaching as universities come to recognise that general practice pro-

vides a more realistic view of community illness than does hospital medicine. Also, general practices are able to make students feel welcome and included in a way that is very difficult for a large teaching hospital to achieve.

What are the barriers and how do we overcome them?

For most GPs, the biggest barrier to teaching revolves around the multiple demands on our time and energy, and to potential loss of earnings related to this. In addition, some GPs worry about their lack of formal teaching skills and patient satisfaction when students are present. The latter two concerns are in most cases unfounded. As for patient satisfaction, studies suggest that very few patients object to having a student present or believe their care is diminished because of the student's presence. In fact, many feel the extra attention is an advantage!

At present, the financial reward for teaching students is minimal. Practices can apply for remuneration of \$50 per student per half day session through the Practice Incentive Program. Continuing professional development points are awarded at the rate of 1 point per half day teaching session. Various groups who believe in the value of teaching – to both teachers and students – are lobbying to improve these rewards.

There is no doubt that having a student in your practice takes up time, however, there are a number of strategies we as GP teachers can use to deliver very beneficial learning

experiences while minimising disruption to the consultation schedule. The student can:

- deliver patient education
- assist with minor procedures (eg. dressings, suturing)
- work with the practice nurse
- undertake patient assessments (eg. '75+ health assessment', diabetes, asthma assessments)
- assist with writing up patient notes, referral letters and other paperwork
- accompany patients to specialists, X-ray or pathology services, and
- attend home and nursing home visits.

Conclusion

Teaching students can be a very rewarding and enjoyable experience. General practitioners with an interest in becoming involved should contact their local medical school for more information.

Conflict of interest: none.

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