



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Currents in Pharmacy Teaching and Learning

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/cptl

Experiences in Teaching and Learning

Impact of debates on student perceptions and competency scores in the advanced pharmacy practice setting

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Experiential
Debate
Student perceptions

ABSTRACT

Background and purpose: Advanced pharmacy practice experience (APPE) students are faced with the difficult reality that there is rarely one correct answer to a patient care question. Faculty preceptors developed a clinical debate activity to provide students with an opportunity to explore pharmacy topics with competing viewpoints.

Educational activity and setting: The clinical debate activity was implemented in the APPE setting as a collaboration between three faculty preceptors from Drake University and University of Iowa. Student pre-debate and post-debate survey data was collected to assess the perceived impact of clinical debates on student confidence in skills related to the debate. Students were also asked to provide which skills were developed through the debate, whether participation in the debate changed their opinion on the issue, and if debates should be used as a teaching tool. Faculty preceptor scores on midpoint and final evaluations for applicable APPE competencies were also evaluated.

Findings: Forty-two students participated in a clinical debate over a 12-month period. Students demonstrated improved confidence in almost all areas assessed, and 90.5% of students felt debates should be used as a teaching tool. Assessment of faculty midpoint (pre-debate) and final (post-debate) evaluation scores revealed statistically significant improvements in competencies related to literature evaluation and communication skills.

Discussion and conclusions: Clinical debates have had a positive impact on both subjective and objective results in this APPE setting. Preceptors are encouraged to consider implementing a similar activity. Debates are a useful teaching tool in developing confidence and skills.

Background and purpose

The pharmacy curriculum is designed to make students “practice-ready” so that graduates are ready to deliver evidence-based patient care in a variety of practice settings. The American Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards 2016 specifically require that graduates have the ability to evaluate scientific literature to advance population health and patient-centered care (Standard 1.1) and apply evidence-based clinical reasoning skills across the patient’s lifespan (Standard 25.7).¹ Additionally ACPE requires that colleges and schools of pharmacy prepare graduates to effectively communicate when interacting with individuals,

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cptl.2017.09.011>

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groups, and organizations (Standard 3.6), with recent emphasis on effective communication in interprofessional healthcare teams (Standard 11.3).¹

While patient cases are often used to prepare students for the nuances of real-world patients, students are limited by their experience and lack of clinical judgment. Cases used throughout the didactic curriculum are often black and white and designed so that students must select a correct answer in order to gain foundational knowledge. As students progress into advanced pharmacy practice experiences (APPEs), they are faced with the reality that there is rarely one correct answer to a patient care question or scenario. In fact, there are often many valid arguments with contradicting conclusions. APPE students who are expected to establish their clinical judgment in these scenarios may find this to be challenging or frustrating. Additionally, once students establish their position based on literature that they have collected and assessed, it is often difficult for them to confidently communicate and defend their position to other healthcare providers who may have differing opinions.

These precepting challenges led to the development of an activity to enhance APPE student skills in these areas. As debates have been documented as a teaching tool in other pharmacy education settings, faculty preceptors within the UnityPoint Health-Des Moines health system implemented an APPE clinical debate activity to provide APPE students with an opportunity to explore relevant adult medicine pharmacy topics with competing viewpoints.²⁻⁶ The activity was designed to challenge students to locate and assess relevant pieces of supporting literature and to defend their argument on a clinical controversy, which has the potential to translate to better literature evaluation skills in other aspects of the experience. Additionally, students were challenged to present their position in a persuasive, yet respectful manner. Practice with this type of communication is an important aspect in understanding how to make and defend recommendations as a part of an interprofessional medical team.

Previously published literature on clinical debates focuses primarily on the use of debates as a teaching tool in the didactic pharmacy education setting. These debates included student debate participants ranging from first- through third-year professional pharmacy students and occurred in both required and elective courses.²⁻⁶ Data evaluating each of these experiences demonstrated increases in students' perceived literature evaluation skills, communication skills, and critical thinking skills following participation in a debate.²⁻⁶ While the use of debates in the didactic setting has proven to be beneficial in terms of student perceptions, the authors felt that the use of debates in the APPE setting may prove to be even more valuable. APPE students have a stronger foundational knowledge, and they are immersed in practice, giving them an opportunity to gain an appreciation for some of the challenges of patient care when one right answer may not exist. Additionally, they routinely apply literature to real patients for which they are expected to justify and communicate their recommendations, often with other health care providers.

To our knowledge this is one of the first studies to assess the use of structured clinical debates in the APPE setting. The primary objective of this study was to assess the perceived impact of clinical debates on student confidence in various skills needed for future practice. Additionally, this study was designed to assess student perceptions of the usefulness of clinical debates as a teaching tool. The secondary objective was to assess the impact of clinical debates on APPE evaluation competency scores related to literature evaluation and communication.

Educational activity and setting

This clinical debate activity was implemented in the APPE setting as a collaboration between three faculty preceptors from two academic institutions, Drake University and University of Iowa. While faculty preceptors conduct different APPEs (two ambulatory care sites and one acute care site), all are affiliated with the UnityPoint Health-Des Moines health system. Each faculty preceptor has one to two students during each five-week block.

At the beginning of each experience, students are divided into two groups, given a debate topic, and assigned a specific position to defend. An attempt is made to balance the number of students in each group, and debate groups generally consist of two to three students. In order to accommodate the different schedules for each experience, students are typically given one afternoon to work with their group members once a week for three or four weeks. Students are asked to prepare a summary handout that highlights three to four main points defending their argument, literature to support each point, and a comprehensive list of references used to prepare for the debate, which they present to all attendees (including debate opponents) on the day of the debate. While students are encouraged to use primary literature and guidelines when possible, they are allowed to present information from any resource during the course of the debate. Students are also encouraged to prepare for both sides of the debate in order to provide the soundest argument for why their position is superior.

Clinical debate topics are selected based on 1) the absence of a clear "correct" answer/position; 2) the existence of a body of evidence to support both sides of the debate and 3) relevance to one or more of the practice settings. Clinical debate topics utilized over the course of this study included: the long-term use of bisphosphonates, bridging for interruption of anticoagulation therapy in atrial fibrillation patients, blood pressure goals for patients age ≥ 60 years old, first line blood pressure agents in patients with diabetes, hormone replacement therapy in post-menopausal women, and testosterone replacement therapy for age-related hypogonadism.

The debate typically takes place during the fourth or fifth week of the experience. All faculty preceptors attend the debates, and other APPE and introductory pharmacy practice experience (IPPE) students on experientials within the health system are invited to attend as audience members. The debate follows a modified Lincoln-Douglas format. During the debate, student teams take turns verbally presenting their argument in the form of an opening argument, rebuttal, and concluding statement with up to 10 minutes, five minutes, and two minutes for each section, respectively (Table 1). The debate concludes with questions from audience members.

Student teams are evaluated by all three faculty preceptors using a non-validated rubric (Appendix A) that is provided to the students during the first few days of the experience. Evaluation areas on the rubric include: opening argument, rebuttal, literature,

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