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Research Paper

# Use of Skype™ sessions with top cancer trial physicians to bring Interprofessional Education (IPE) into a didactic oncology course

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To incorporate meaningful Interprofessional Education (IPE) into a core didactic oncology course by bringing into the classroom a series of cancer specialist physicians, from around the United States, who instructed from and discussed their own clinical trials.

**Methods:** The instructor recruited physicians from selected nationwide cancer centers as well as from more regional institutions. Prior to each IPE session, students pre-read relevant trials or other materials. At an arranged time, an approximately 30-minute Skype™ session began which included student questions. Assessments of student learning included individual examinations and a group trial. Survey data was also collected on student views of interprofessionalism, cancer trial informatics and the role of pharmacists on trial teams.

**Results:** Group clinical trials showed substantial student creativity and achievement of new skills in trial design. Essays indicated that students learned as individuals. Survey data showed that prior to the interprofessional sessions, students felt uncomfortable discussing trial designs/results with graduates of other health professions. Following the sessions and group trial assignment, students gained significant confidence discussing trials with physicians and felt increased recognition for the pharmacist's role in the trial team and increased appreciation for the perspective of trial physicians. Students reported that they enjoyed the opportunity to talk with top cancer physicians.

**Conclusions:** Didactic core courses can be modified to accommodate meaningful interprofessional team education. Considerable time was required to arrange external Skype™ speakers; however, this IPE oncology exercise was very highly rated by students indicating that this was preparatory time well-invested.

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**Keywords:** Interprofessional Education; Oncology; Clinical trials; Oncologist

**Abbreviations:** AACP, American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy; ACPE, Accreditation Council of Pharmacy Education; APPE, Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experience; HSC, Health Science Center; IPE, Interprofessional Education; IPPE, Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experience; NCI, National Cancer Institute

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## Introduction/background

Interprofessional Education (IPE) between health professions occurs when educators and learners from two or more health professions interact to provide knowledge, skills, and values to the learner.<sup>1</sup> IPE should prepare students to become a contributing member of an interprofessional team, which includes prescribers.<sup>2</sup> Interprofessional collaboration or contribution to a health care team has become a recognized objective described by multiple professional accrediting bodies as an important component

of the professional medical curricula in standards for allopathic,<sup>3</sup> osteopathic,<sup>4</sup> dental,<sup>5</sup> veterinary,<sup>6</sup> and pharmacy schools.<sup>2</sup>

Accreditation Council on Pharmaceutical Education (ACPE) Standard 11 specifies an “Interprofessional team education,” stating, “The curriculum must include opportunities for students to learn about, from, and with other members of the interprofessional healthcare team.”<sup>2</sup> However, several realities can be limiting toward interprofessional team education in general and in pharmacy education specifically.<sup>7</sup> Although such team education need not be limited to interactions with other health care professions, interactions with prescriber professions such as medicine and dentistry are important collaborations in patient care. Therefore, IPE with other professional doctoral programs is often more readily accommodated at Health Science Centers (HSC).<sup>7</sup> IPE exercises can be more challenging to set up at pharmacy programs lacking HSCs, close proximity to other professional programs, or those located on a small campus. This becomes even more difficult if IPE is conducted through student group mixes from different professional disciplines. In addition, this student–student interaction can fall short of professional education since the students, by definition, are not yet graduates with experience in their professional discipline.

Prior to clinical rotations, educational interactions between experienced professionals, such as prescribers, and students is often through Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experiences (IPPEs). Although IPPEs and Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences (APPEs) can result in interprofessional team education, ACPE Standard 11 cites a requirement for IPE both in practice experiences and throughout the didactic curriculum. Few published examples show meaningful integration of IPE into the didactic curriculum. The objective of this instructional exercise was to accomplish high quality and meaningful IPE within a pharmacy program lacking a large HSC.

Oncology is a subject that is well suited for interprofessional team education. It involves a team-based effort that can include physicians (e.g., medical oncologists, surgeons, and/or radiation oncologists), oncology nurses, physician assistants, dietitians, oncology social workers,<sup>8</sup> as well as community and oncology pharmacy specialists who practice in a clinic or hospital setting. Oncology is a part of the didactic curriculum in all pharmacy schools<sup>9</sup> and the vast majority offer APPEs in oncology; however, these are usually electives. For most students, didactic exposure to oncology topics will be the extent of their curricular experience because APPE experiences typically have very limited rotation slots, particularly at new programs.<sup>9</sup> As a result, many students will not be able to experience IPE from oncology team professionals.

Clinical trials are an exciting aspect of oncology that have the potential to foretell the future of agents and treatment cohorts. They also combine several fundamental aspects of both basic and clinical oncology such as mechanisms, pharmacokinetics, pharmaceuticals, pharmacogenomics, biomarkers, adverse

events, medication monitoring, protocols, and counseling. We felt an exercise in clinical trials could help reinforce other didactic instruction within a core oncology course. The principle investigators of national clinical trials are most often physicians and often at major cancer centers such as those that the National Cancer Institute (NCI) has designated comprehensive or clinical. Because most pharmacy schools are not associated with these major cancer centers, education on trials by the physician architects is unavailable to the majority of pharmacy students. Oncology at pharmacy schools is almost always taught using traditional lecture-based format with some case and/or small group discussion.<sup>10</sup> In this course, we refashioned the traditional didactic, in-house pharmacy faculty-based instruction template by incorporating an exercise with cancer specialist physicians from around the United States to deliver IPE by discussing their own clinical trials and the roles that pharmacists play in these trials.

Future cancer protocols are being defined through ongoing clinical trials. As Principal Investigators (PIs) or co-investigators of trials, physicians can provide a unique perspective on up and coming drug agents, treatment strategies, and biomarkers in oncology. IPE between top oncology physicians in the region and in the United States and pharmacy students opens an avenue for students to learn directly about the design, execution, and nuances of cancer clinical trials and future therapeutics. During a series of approximately 30-minute sessions, physicians taught the class through Skype™ (Redmond, WA)<sup>11</sup> by presenting the set-up and results of their favorite trials, past or current. Students had the opportunity to ask direct questions concerning the trial or any aspect of the expert’s field of oncology.

Through discourse with these physicians and other information presented in the rest of the oncology section of the therapeutics course, the specific learning objectives were for students to (1) identify rationales and predict adverse effects of drugs used in individual trials, (2) apply knowledge to their own basic trial design, (3) individually demonstrate application of learned knowledge by explaining in writing in lay terms the rationale and purpose of experimental uses of cancer therapies, and (4) gain knowledge and confidence interacting with professional colleagues including physicians. Objective 1 was assessed through multiple-choice examinations, objectives 2 and 3 were assessed by evaluation of a group designed trial and individual essays, and objective 4 was assessed through pre- and post-session surveys.

## Methods

### *Educational environment*

The student audience was the third year, sixth-semester oncology class of 77 students taught during the spring semester of 2015. This IPE exercise was part of an integrated therapeutics course. Approximately, three hours

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