



COMMENTARY

Clinical education in the osteopathy program at Victoria University



Brett Vaughan^{a,b,*}, Chris MacFarlane^a, Prue Florentine^a

^a College of Health and Biomedicine, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

^b Institute of Sport, Exercise and Active Living, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract Health professionals typically undertake some form of clinical training prior to graduation from a pre-professional education program. This can take place in a variety of settings including hospitals, out-patient clinics and in private health-care facilities. Whilst there is a substantial body of literature that describes clinical education in areas such as medicine and nursing, there is very little in osteopathy. The purpose of this paper is to present an overview of clinical education in the osteopathy program at Victoria University. It is anticipated this will provide a basis for further discussion and research into an area that has limited coverage in the literature.

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Introduction

Clinical teaching is the cornerstone of most health professional education programs and provides students with an opportunity to provide quality patient care,¹ and to develop the skills, attitudes, and values required to manage patients once they

become a qualified professional.² The premise of clinical education is that students with pre-clinical skills are exposed to a clinical environment under the supervision of qualified practitioners to develop their skills and knowledge as a health professional, above and beyond that which can be in case-based tutorials.³ The qualified practitioners provide the student with guidance about the management of patients, demonstrate clinical skills and model communication with patients, peers, and other health professionals.

Clinical teaching and education have been described at length in the medical, nursing and physical therapy literature, however there is very

* Corresponding author. College of Health and Biomedicine, City Flinders Lane Campus, Victoria University, PO Box 14428, Melbourne, Victoria 8001, Australia. Tel.: +61 3 9919 1210; fax: +61 3 9919 1030.

E-mail address: brett.vaughan@vu.edu.au (B. Vaughan).

little about the way clinical education is undertaken in osteopathy. The basis for this paper is to provide an overview of clinical education in the osteopathy program at Victoria University (VU). It is anticipated that by presenting some background information on clinical education at VU, a discourse can commence that considers the challenges of such education, and provides ideas for further research into this important aspect of the development of future osteopaths.

Osteopaths and osteopathy teaching programs in Australia

Osteopaths in Australia are government registered primary healthcare professionals, that is, for most situations a referral from a medical practitioner is not required. As such, the primary healthcare role requires the osteopath to have an understanding of the pathophysiology of a wide variety of diseases so that patients who are suitable for osteopathic treatment but also have coexisting conditions, are managed appropriately and effectively. In addition, this role also requires the recognition of those conditions that are not amenable to osteopathic treatment and refer appropriately. Training is currently undertaken in a university setting over a 5 year period where students learn the subjects related to osteopathic examination and techniques as well as the biomedical sciences, clinical examinations, medical knowledge (i.e. pharmacology, diagnostic imaging interpretation) and common health conditions that may present in clinical practice.

The current paper discusses the model of clinical education currently used in the combined 5-year Bachelor of Science (Clinical Science) and Master of Health Science (Osteopathy) program at VU. This program has been accredited by the Australian and New Zealand Osteopathic Council (ANZOC) in line with the Accreditation Policy.⁴ This policy includes references to clinical training and education that accredited programs are required to demonstrate. The policy does not recommend the minimum hours, minimum number of patient treatments, number of observations for a student to complete, or clinical educator to student ratios. The Accreditation Policy requires students gain

*"...extensive clinical experience in screening, diagnosis, treatment and health management for a diversity of patients and clinical conditions under the supervision of experienced osteopathic and other healthcare practitioners. The expected outcome is graduates who are able to independently practice osteopathy safely and competently and recognise when referral to other practitioners is necessary."*⁴

At the end of a program, graduating students are eligible to apply for registration with the Osteopathy Board of Australia or the Osteopathic Council of New Zealand.

Clinical education at Victoria University

VU is a government-funded university that has campuses in central and western Melbourne, Australia. The university has a number of health profession programs including nursing, psychology, nutrition and dietetics, exercise physiology and paramedics.

Facilities

The majority of the clinical education takes place in campus-based clinical facilities at VU. There are two clinic facilities; a 16-room facility located in the central business district in Melbourne and a 10-room facility in the western suburbs of Melbourne at St Albans. Both facilities are also equipped with a rehabilitation gymnasium. All clinical records are retained on computer. The teaching clinic is open to the general public and can be described as both a student-led clinic⁵ and patient-care environment.⁶

Students are engaged in the day-to-day running of the clinic (making appointments, receiving phone calls, processing payments) and manage patients under the supervision of registered osteopaths in order to develop their skills and confidence as a practicing health professional. This setting provides for 'relative' learning in the context of the environment the student will enter upon graduation,⁷ and as the clinic is open for 48 weeks of the year it provides the student with continuity, both in clinical education and patient care. The student will generally work with the same clinical educator(s) for at least 16 weeks of the year at which point they have the opportunity to move to another day in order to broaden their exposure to different clinical educators and potentially, different patients. In their review of longitudinal integrated clerkship's, Thistlethwaite et al.⁸ used 13 weeks as the cutoff point to distinguish between longitudinal and block placements.

Administration of the clinics

The clinics have two academic clinical coordinators (BV and PF), an administrative clinical coordinator and a clinical placement assistant. The academic clinic coordinators are qualified osteopaths who have an emphasis on curriculum development and assessment, and are responsible for the overall running of the clinic – student welfare

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