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Research

Impact of an interprofessional international experience abroad on the attitudes of health care professional students

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Abstract

Objective: To measure health care professional students' attitudes toward international experiential learning and the role of pharmacists on an interprofessional international experience (IIE).

Methods: An electronic survey instrument was distributed to all health professional students from the Midwestern University Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, Pharmacy, Dental Medicine, Optometry, and Podiatric Medicine participating in an IIE to Guatemala between 2010 and 2013.

Results: Of the 64 participants, 49 (77%) responded to the survey. Overall, students' ratings of their ability to learn curricular outcomes improved. The most improvement was seen with student's sense of civic and social responsibility, students with intermediate Spanish-speaking ability ($p = 0.03$), with female students ($p = 0.06$), and students who initially felt the experience would not change their values/beliefs ($p = 0.06$). Interdisciplinary collaboration was rated the most valuable aspect of the experience (79%). Pharmacists were deemed to be accessible educators (61%) and are an important part of the interprofessional team (42%).

Conclusion: IIEs expand interprofessional collaboration between students, improve student's sense of civic and social responsibility, and promote an optimal environment for education and professional development.

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Background

International service experiences provide a rewarding and enjoyable avenue for health care professional students to use their knowledge, skills, and values to address health care disparities and provide culturally competent patient care to individuals in need.¹ Such experiences also enable students to work with diverse patient populations, develop

cross-cultural understanding, incorporate academic concepts into clinical practice, and learn about health systems and approaches to medical care in other countries.² Students can practice integrating core competencies as proposed by the Committee on the Health Professions Education Summit: providing patient-centered care, working in interdisciplinary teams, employing evidence-based practice, and applying strategies for quality improvement.^{3–5} The large mixture of health care professional students and practitioners attending international experiences promotes an optimal environment for education and professional development.⁶ Health care professional students who have participated in international experiences in the past have reported substantial learning in the areas of interdisciplinary teamwork and cultural competency and have found that their experiences cultivated

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personal desires to work abroad and reinforced dedication to work with underserved patient populations.^{4,5}

An interprofessional international experience (IIE) is widely supported and often offered to health care provider students as an experiential learning opportunity. Interest and involvement of the United States (US) higher education in global learning and global health has increased over the past several decades. A 2009 survey of universities by the Consortium of Universities for Global Health (CUGH) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that 67% of responding institutions reported a rapid growth in global health programs, significant increases in enrollment/participation of undergraduate and graduate students in global health programs in the past three years, and a large increase in the number of student organizations focused on global health.⁷ Within pharmacy education, a survey conducted in 1993 reported that 50% of schools had some form of exchange program with a college in another country.⁸ More recently, an unpublished study conducted in 2010 by the American Association of College of Pharmacy (AACCP) found increasing numbers of colleges of pharmacy with active global/international programs in the areas of research, PharmD elective experiential rotations, recruitment of graduate students/postdocs, as well as other ventures.⁹

A review of the literature indicates that many studies have been conducted that focus on student interest and the added value of pharmacy services to international service trips.^{10–13} A 2004 study at the Nova Southeastern University College of Pharmacy discussed the effectiveness of an international service trip to Jamaica as an elective course and found students integrate their didactic knowledge and clinical experience to provide pharmaceutical care.¹⁴ A 2011 study at Shenandoah University revealed the added value of pharmacy services on a short-term international experience to Nicaragua by documenting pharmacy interventions.¹⁰ A 2011 study by Purdue University documented the impact of clinical recommendations made by Kenyan and American pharmacy students during an acute care advanced pharmacy practice experience (APPE) to Kenya.¹² A recent 2013 study conducted by the University of Tennessee Health Science Center College of Pharmacy describes that pharmacy graduates who completed an international APPE at one of the university's 17 affiliated international sites had increased cultural awareness and appreciation for health care goals globally.¹⁵

This study is unique because it covers multiple years of the same IIE and therefore provides a larger subject pool than previous studies of this nature. Additionally, this larger scale research study assesses the impact of an IIE on the attitudes of multiple disciplines of health care professional students, not just pharmacy students. The primary objective of this study is to measure health care professional students' attitudes toward international experiential learning and the role of the pharmacist before and after attending an IIE. A secondary objective is to ascertain whether changes in attitudes vary by demographic characteristics.

Methods

For the past 15 years, Midwestern University, a health professions institution, has collaborated with DoCare International, an outside medical outreach organization, to organize a two-week long annual IIE for its health care professional students and faculty/alumni to the central highlands of Guatemala. DoCare International is a not-for-profit medical outreach organization comprising DO and MD physicians, pharmacists, nurses, dentists, optometrists, podiatrists, physician assistants, and students dedicated to providing much-needed health care to indigent and isolated people in remote areas around the world. This IIE provides clinical care to nearly 3000 Mayan Indians in such cities as San Andres, San Lorenzo, and Antigua. Clinical services include pharmacy (patient counseling and medication acquisition), general medicine, podiatry, pediatrics, dermatology, dentistry, women's health (pregnancy exams, cervical/vaginal exams, and pregnancy charting), optometry (vision prescriptions, eyeglasses, and sunglasses), and laboratory (urine analysis, hemoglobin A1c, fasting blood glucose, and microbiology analysis). Students work alongside each other and rotate through the various areas of the clinic to provide support to the volunteer health care providers and faculty.

The present study included a panel of cross-sections and utilized a pre-trip survey (completed prior to the IIE) and a post-trip survey (completed after the IIE) to better understand participating students' attitudes toward such international service experiences. Study participants included students from the pharmacy, physician assistant, podiatry, ophthalmology, and osteopathic programs across two campuses. Students applied and were selected three months prior to the IIE based on academic standing and Spanish proficiency level. Participation in the IIE was not a component of a didactic class through Midwestern University, and there were no specific prerequisites to be completed prior to the service trip. As a result, the trip focused solely on self-directed learning. Data were collected sequentially over three years of the IIE from February 2011–March 2013 (one trip per year).

An electronic survey containing 20 questions was developed to measure participants' demographics and attitudes toward international health care experiences, using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree). Of the survey items, 10 measured socio-demographics (e.g., age, gender, race, and program of study) and 10 items were attitude statements based on the two domains of the college of pharmacy's global curricular outcomes related to the student's ability to practice patient care and demonstrate professionalism (Table 1; also a copy of the survey instrument is available upon request from the corresponding author). An e-mail including background information for the study and a direct hyperlink to the self-administered survey (uploaded to SurveyMonkey.com[®]) was sent to all students attending the annual IIE to Guatemala two weeks prior to the trip start date (pre-trip

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