

From Strangers to Colleagues; the University of Alberta's Interprofessional Pathway for Health Science students

-by Sue Robins

They started out as individual students from different faculties. By the end of the half-day Interprofessional (IP) Pathway Launch at the University of Alberta, they'd gone from strangers to colleagues.

"This was my first real experience of the interprofessional approach," says Harold Pang, a nursing student and president of the Health Sciences Student Association. "It was an eye-opening experience to truly discover that there are so many people involved in a health-care team."

The IP Launch is a gathering of students from six different health faculties, barely three weeks into the first year of their programs. Some students are fresh out of high school, while others have university degrees. Four half-day IP Launches are held in September with combined attendance totaling over 1,000 students.

"The health sciences faculties here at the University of Alberta understand the need for interprofessional health education," says Sharla King, Director of the Health Sciences Education and Research Commons (HSERC). "The Health Sciences Council (HSC) is continually looking for new and better ways to ensure our students graduate ready to become agents of change, to build health teams, to collaborate with their peers, and to create a more efficient health system. As the health education and research arm of the Council, we are well-positioned to take the lead on this crucial aspect of health and wellness education."

The IP Launch is the students' introduction to the world of collaborative health. The day begins in the Edmonton Clinic Health Academy, where the students are assigned to teams with names like Femur and Stethoscope. The anxiety is palpable in the opening session. Participants do not know each other, and they have to spend the next three hours rotating among stations and collaboratively completing a case study. The newly formed teams



Health Science students visit booths to learn about the role and function of the health regulatory bodies.

stream out into the hallways to meet a patient mentor, a practitioner group, and two health regulatory bodies.

The IP Launch demands active participation from the students – this is not passive learning. The theme of the Launch is patient-centred care, and the stations build on four IP competencies: communication, collaboration, role clarification and reflection.

Eleven health regulatory bodies set up their booths and stock them with publications and freebies for the students. The Launch is an opportunity for the colleges to highlight their professions and explain how each professional plays a pivotal part in the health-care team.



Students meet with Patient mentors.

“This is a brilliant event for the students to see how they fit in and work with each other,” says Doug Cook, the Executive Director of the College of Dietitians of Alberta.

“The Launch is a great opportunity to teach students early in their career to work with others and to know they aren’t alone. It’s also an opportunity to advance the profile of our profession,” adds Darlene Fraser, Member Services Coordinator at the College of Dental Hygienists of Alberta.

Not all colleges at the Launch have students at the University of Alberta. For example, the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta is invited to the IP Launch to demonstrate the variety of health professionals students will work with after graduation. “I love talking to students,” says Linda Findlay, the college Practice Consultant. She is happy to answer the common student question: what is the difference between an LPN and an RN. (The short answer is that LPNs are frontline nurses who graduate with a two-year college diploma, while RNs are university educated and have a broader scope of practice than their LPN colleagues).

“One question I was asked often was: how can other health professionals make it easier for us to do our jobs?” says Larissa Fadish, Deputy Registrar

of the College of Medical Laboratory Technologists of Alberta. “I was impressed with the quality of student questions, and the kinds of insights these questions reflect,” she says.

After visiting the college booths, teams rotate to a patient mentor station. Patient mentors share their personal health experiences and students are challenged to build rapport, and learn about the patients’ real-life experiences communicating with their health teams.

Gina Clarke’s wisdom comes from having cancer and a leg amputation. She says she gives her time, and shares her story at the Launch because she wants to give back to the medical system that saved her life.

“I hope the students come away from this experience knowing that it doesn’t take extra time to be polite to a patient. This is an aspect of the patient-caregiver experience that worries me, because I see genuine interpersonal skills and good bedside manner fading away,” Gina says. Medical student Andrea Johnson found the patient mentors invaluable. “They helped me see the patient as a whole person, and focus on discovering what is important to that person in their life. Knowing what disease or condition a patient has is only part of the story. I also need to learn to hear the things they are telling me about their lives, what else brought them through my door.”

Next, the students move to a station of practitioners. An exercise specialist, mental health coordinator, dietitian, and nurse from Edmonton Southside Primary Care Network (PCN) talk about their roles, and how they work together as a team.

Sandra Butler, RN, relishes the opportunity to talk about how satisfying it is to work in a team environment. She explains to the audience how her team provides patient-centred care; and that this can be as simple as picking up the phone to contact a colleague.

“This event opens students’ eyes to opportunities for collaboration in health care. It lets them know they don’t have to work in silos when they are in practice,” adds Sue Perry, Mental Health Coordinator.

Finally, teams spend an hour reviewing a patient case study, and using the skills and knowledge of their full team to establish goals for care. The students emerge from the experience smiling and enthusiastic.

“I get it now. I understand how each profession brings their skills to the table, and I’ve realized how much more we can do if we work together,” says Mohammad Maghfourian, a physical therapy student.

“It’s really liberating. I’ve learned I can trust my team to help me care for patients – I don’t have to know everything,” concludes pharmacy student Daniel Leung.

By the end of their time at the Launch, an amazing transformation has occurred – individual students have coalesced into interprofessional teams. The impression left by the IP Launch will stay with them as they become health professionals working in real life practice. They will graduate inspired and equipped to build teams, to work with their peers in other professions, and to make important advances in patient-centred care for all Albertans.



Interdisciplinary team reviews a patient case study.