

Patient Companion Program: A Curriculum to Promote Patient Advocacy and Geriatric Education

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Abstract

The Patient Companion Project was created to provide meaningful education and volunteer opportunities to undergraduate pre-health students while benefitting geriatric patients living in a long-term care setting. This curriculum emphasizes education covering pertinent geriatric topics, including elder abuse, health literacy, advanced care planning, and palliative care. The program provides companionship to long-term care patients in the hopes of improving health outcomes and exposing undergraduate students to core concepts of patient advocacy before entering medical school.

Background

Volunteer and clinical experiences are important for admission of students to health professional programs yet combining these experiences can be difficult. Additionally, geriatric patients often face challenges in health care with reduced access to resources, limited health care literacy, language barriers, and lack of social support. These patients are at increased risk of isolation, mood disorders, and experience a large burden of illness leading to high healthcare utilization. Pairing pre-health students with vulnerable older adult companions creates an opportunity for mutual benefit, preparing students for entrance into graduate school while improving healthcare outcomes for patients.

Materials and Methods

Participant Recruitment: pre-health students from the University of Colorado at Denver and University of Colorado at Boulder were recruited via presentations at pre-health program meetings and emails distributed to pre-professional emails.

Companion Recruitment: coordinated with the Colorado State Veteran's Home Recreational Coordinator to identify isolated veterans without severe cognitive impairment as potential companions.

Expectations: volunteers meet with their assigned veteran twice every month for two years. Volunteers meet with program leaders monthly for 1-2 hours for educational lectures, journal club, book discussion, and to debrief about the program experience.

Data Collection: Students complete online after visit surveys after every patient visit. Undergraduate students are also surveyed regarding confidence levels related to program objectives with pre-then post- Likert scale questions, as well as what open-ended questions regarding impact of the program on future career goals.

Results



Figure 1: Comparison of pre-program and during program confidence levels for each of the established learning objectives using Likert scale rating where 1= Not at all and 5= Extremely Confident. N=3

Program Objectives: Participants reported increased confidence across all program objectives after participating in the program for six months. Confidence improved across all types of learning objectives as well (i.e., knowledge based, skill based, and value based).

Student Reflections on Program:

-“When I was able to build a trustworthy relationship with my companion, I felt like I was contributing to my community.”

-“I have really enjoyed all of the educational experiences we have had. All of the talks about sensitive, but very important, topics has been really great. I have taken a lot away from these presentations and always look forward to having speakers come in.”

Program Impact on Future Career Plans:

-“I feel like participating in this program has strengthened my desire to go into medicine and has provided me with a source of motivation and inspiration to continue pursuing my desired career. It has given me insight on what some of the biggest issues in medicine are and has shown me more specifically what the role of a good doctor is.”

-“When I was spending time with my companion, I often learned how he dealt with pain and medical situation from a patient's perspective. I believe understanding the patient's daily struggle was a valuable experience otherwise I could not have. It made me want to help geriatric patients in the future.”

Discussion

Program Strengths:

- Unique program providing early clinical exposure and healthcare education for pre-health undergraduate students
- Improvement of student attitudes towards older adults
- Early education for undergraduate students in principles of patient advocacy
- Exposure to clinical settings for undergraduate pre-health students
- Teach solid foundation of communication skills that students practice with their companion
- Career mentorship for undergraduate students from medical students and faculty
- Students gain perspective into the field of medicine
- Volunteer experience and career mentorship strengthens health professional school applications
- Through participation in the program, students gain confidence in core principles of geriatric medicine, communication, and patient advocacy

Program Challenges:

- Issues with consistent meetings and documentation after visits
- Transition to letter writing during COVID-19 pandemic to protect undergraduate and geriatric companions
- Difficulty responding to letters and phone calls because of increased responsibilities of State Veterans Home during pandemic
- Death of patient companions

Future Directions:

- Create a simple, straightforward curriculum that can be easily replicated by others at interested institutions
- Return to in-person visits and offer shadowing opportunities when pandemic wanes
- Monthly lectures will continue in the zoom format unless we are implementing a hands-on workshop
- Plan to meet informally with veterans regarding their experience

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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