Interprofessional education for undergraduate health care students throughout their training

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There is growing interest around the UK in introducing students to interprofessional education (IPE) at the pre-registration level. The Centre for Interprofessional Practice (CIPP), based at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich, is currently in the process of developing an Interprofessional Learning (IPL) programme that is offered to all students in every year of their health care training. The overall aim of the IPL programme is to foster the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour that facilitate effective interprofessional working.

During 2003–4, CIPP ran an IPL programme involving first-year students from six different health care professions (occupational therapy, midwifery, physiotherapy, medicine, pharmacy and nursing). The format of this IPL programme originates from a voluntary pilot IPL programme for first-year students, which was delivered the previous year. During the nine-week IPL programme, students worked together in cross-professional groups, supported by an Educational Facilitator, and discussed team issues related to interprofessional working based on a case scenario.

As part of the evaluation we wanted to measure the impact of the programme on interprofessional attitudes. Therefore, each student was asked to complete the ‘Attitudes towards Health Professionals Questionnaire’ (AHPQ) before and after the programme. Preliminary data show differences in how students perceive different health professionals at the beginning of their training and that these attitudes change over time. Data suggest that the programme influenced interprofessional attitudes in a direction that is likely to facilitate sound interprofessional working relations.

Student feedback from the first-year IPL programme identified important issues including: how working in cross-professional groups helped to challenge preconceived ideas about each other professional roles; the importance of commencing interprofessional learning at an early stage of their training; and the need for similar learning opportunities throughout the students’ training.
This first level of the IPL programme will be extended to include second-year students. The second level of the IPL programme is focussed around issues related to interprofessional working, such as ‘communication within the team’ and ‘communication between the patient and the team’. The students who worked together in the first part of the IPL programme will meet again in their second year to discuss these issues in relation to experiences during their respective clinical placements.

This coming year CIPP will provide an IPL programme, which is compulsory for all first-year students and the majority of second-year health care students at UEA (with the aim of becoming compulsory for nursing and midwifery students from 2005 – 6). We are also in the process of developing a third level of the IPL programme, which will culminate in a student conference focusing on the care of the patient. For some students this may be their last IPL experience and thus we hope that these three levels of IPL will equip the students in such a way that they feel confident in their professional roles and positive towards collaboration with other health professionals in the future.