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Stories of change

PARTNERING WITH PATIENTS AT ULSTER UNIVERSITY, NORTHERN IRELAND

Involving service users in undergraduate healthcare education so future healthcare professionals develop patient focussed communication skills

What we did

Around three years ago we set up a service user involvement group to help inform, refine and set priorities so our undergraduate physiotherapy students could build skills to interact well with patients. We met multiple times to agree what was important to deliver in a module on inflammatory arthritis. Together, we developed a plan for what the educational priorities might look like, then we implemented it in Easter of 2021. We enabled 90 students to develop key skills, so once they begin work, they can run excellent, personalised consultations, share decision making, and empower their patients to self-manage their condition.



Our motivation

There was a lack of service user involvement in determining curriculum content and learning outcomes. We wanted to test the assumptions that we focus too much on the biomedical in undergraduate education, by adding in content and exposing students to patients in a controlled and supported way. We saw students with good clinical knowledge going into work, missing key communication skills that are crucial for good patient experiences.

The difference we are making

We collected qualitative and quantitative data from people with lived experience as well the students. Evaluation has shown students really valued having patients as part of their learning. Their self-confidence was increased. 100% of those involved felt it was important, found it enjoyable and felt it should be included more in undergraduate healthcare education.

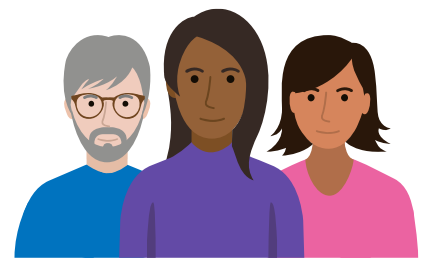
Our students build their communication skills so they will become better clinicians.

We are empowering people with lived experience by putting them in the driving seat to inform and influence the future healthcare workforce.

What's next?

The development of a service user involvement strategy for Undergraduate Allied Health Professionals and Health Science students at Ulster University. We hope to involve service users in things like student recruitment, curriculum design, and student assessment.

Versus arthritis have already started to work with other health professional groups in the University.





Making change happen

If we want to empower people who use services and ask them to help shape them, it seems crazy not to involve those individuals in the education of healthcare professionals. We wanted to provide meaningful learning experiences for our undergraduates. We started with a cohort of 90 students. It was quite resource intensive. We had to prepare the students and they spent a lot of time rehearsing their consultation skills, focussing on listening and showing empathy whilst keeping the conversation relevant with boundaries in place. We had prepared them on the need to use probing questions, but balancing that with not going sight-seeing into someone's life if there is no clinical need. That is something they need to learn about, along with how to support people who become upset. Giving them exposure in a controlled environment means that once these students go out into the world of work, they may not be so overwhelmed about how to best support their patients.

On the day, it was an emotive experience for the volunteer patients. They came into a room where 6 or 7 students could ask them a little bit about themselves and their medical history. I had to get colleagues to come along to help out with it as I wanted an academic on call for different groups in case any issues arose. We had six service users on the day, and various others who helped along the way. We have developed a great relationship with our volunteers. They've all agreed to come back again. Some have offered to help us with the broader service user strategy. Some of the people with lived experience were unable to attend on the day due to their health, so it was helpful that we had some back up plans so the day could still run smoothly. We are exploring options and ways we can reimburse volunteers for the time they give to this work.

I was nervous about how the session would go. I knew I had to empower the students and let them lead to make it an authentic and effective learning experience. We had to deliver our first session online due to covid. For us, digital increased accessibility for people who cannot travel or who are immune compromised. Geographically we can be more inclusive too. The downside is losing some things around communication, such as body language, and the comfort and natural dialogue that occurs when chatting face to face.

“Giving physiotherapy students exposure to working with patients to build their communication skills is a valuable experience for everyone. It is not easy to do effectively, but it is very worthwhile.”

Top tips

- **Prepare, prepare, prepare!**
- **Allow sufficient time for working with service users, and build relationships for long term co-production**
- **Learn from everyone's previous experience. Try to make it an enjoyable experience for all involved.**
- **Spend time working with students so they are well prepared.**
- **Collect feedback and use it to shape future sessions**

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