

Enhancing communication skills of prospective students through the use of patients in the classroom. “Setting the scene from a Patient’s perspective”

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Introduction to the Pathway Opportunity Programme

The Pathway Opportunity Programme (POP) is part of the Widening Participation (WP) initiative, at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) to meet the objectives of the Education Strategy (2016-2021). The POP aims to recognise the talents and achievements of the young people of Northern Ireland, who have the ability to study at QUB yet may need encouragement to apply for a variety of reasons, often due to socio-economic factors. The programme is open to all Northern Ireland residents who are studying an acceptable level 3 programme of study relevant to their career pathway, have achieved 6 GCSEs and whose parents did not attend university.

The Pathway programme was introduced to the School of Nursing and Midwifery (SNAM) at QUB in 2021, with the overall aim of providing participants with an understanding of the difference in each of the four fields of nursing (adult, children’s and young people, learning disability, mental health) and midwifery, and provide them with an insight into the role of the nurse.

One of the main challenges of teaching these participants, is pitching the content of the lesson to address the prior knowledge of the audience. As POP students are aged 17-18, it is assumed that participants have little or no experience working in healthcare. From my 10 years’ experience in working in further education prior to joining QUB, one of the main challenges for students wanting to pursue a career in nursing, is choosing their desired field of nursing. The benefit of engaging with the POP is that participants receive a guaranteed interview and

if successful are awarded their first choice of field of nursing. It is therefore essential that students know what field they wish to pursue.

The POP takes place during the last week of June, where participants stay in the QUB Halls of residence and attend a full week of classes. The main aim of the SNAM POP is to enlighten students with knowledge about the role of the nurse and provide them with an insight into the different fields. To give students the most authentic experience, teaching methods are carefully selected and designed to give the student as real an experience as possible. Teaching methods include, simulation, clinical skills, a trip to the Ulster Hospital and talks from field specific nurses.

Setting the scene

This year I felt that the POP would benefit from patient involvement. The Patient and Carer Education Partnership (PCEP) is an integral part of our School and are involved in planning, co-designing and evaluating all of our programmes that include a professional registration component. I invited one of the members to co-design my teaching session in a way that would mimic a real-life hospital environment and bring a scenario to life. The use of patients in the classroom aims to encourage students to work in partnership with patients to deliver quality care and meet the needs of individual patients (Suikkala et al. 2018).

Brendan contracted Covid-19 in May 2020, he became very unwell and was rushed to hospital to commence treatment. In compliance with public health guidance at that time, his family were not allowed to visit him and were only allowed to communicate virtually. His daughter took a screenshot of their call, minutes before Brendan was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to commence ventilation, a process which forces air in and out of the lungs, as she thought it was going to be the last time she would see her Father.



Figure 1: Screenshot of Brendan and his daughter communicating via WhatsApp
(reproduced with the kind permission of Brendan and his family)

To enhance the teaching session and capture the reality of the situation, Brendan's teaching session was delivered in the clinical skills room with the use of a Manikin that was connected to a heart monitor, IV infusion, oxygen and nasal tubes. The heart monitor was on and was beeping continuously, as would have been the scenario for Brendan when he was admitted to the ICU. The photo of Brendan and his daughter was visible throughout the teaching session. It was evident that it immediately caught the attention of the students. I introduced Brendan and gave a brief overview of the session aims. Then I let Brendan take over. He began the session by asking students to close their eyes. With everyone's eyes closed he then Circulated the room, making noises similar to those he remembers whilst under sedation; this included bin lids opening and closing, wheelchairs moving, speaking to colleagues, laughing, monitors beeping. It was evident that students were following the sounds as Brendan moved around the room.

He invited them to join him again, by opening their eyes, then went on to explain what he remembered when he was sedated. He explained that he could not speak due to the high oxygen flow and could not open his eyes due to being heavily sedated. He reflected upon the use of other senses throughout his illness and how he found comfort when staff spoke to him

and not 'about' him. He discussed the importance of touch and how he developed trust in certain staff who touched his hand and explained what was going on.



Figure 2: Brendan delivering the educational session in the SNAM Clinical Skills Centre, Medical Sciences Building, Queen's University Belfast

Students were invited to ask Brendan questions, and it was evident that they had gained a sense of empathy for the patient and his family. The student guides, who accompany POP students for the week as mentors, and who are currently studying nursing and medicine at QUB, explained that they gained great learning from this session and appreciate the value this session will have on their approach to patients. They explained that they felt a sense of empathy for the patient and agreed this would enhance their skills as practitioners in providing person-centred care (Dickson et al 2018).

Participating in a teaching session like this brought back memories for the patient as he relived some of the trauma he experienced, therefore it is essential that time is taken to debrief with the patient, giving Brendan time to reflect on the session. During this debriefing, Brendan voiced how real it was and how it brought back many memories. Brendan gained great

comfort from the feedback students gave him at the end of the session. They valued his input and were keen to find out more about what he experienced.

As I reflect on this co-designed, co-delivered teaching session, it highlights to me that the voice of the patient should be at the core of our teaching for all aspects of teaching on allied-health programmes. Real-life scenarios will enlighten students to the reality of nursing and help prepare them for clinical placements. POP students have little to no experience of the role of the nurse and it is important for us to provide that reality for them during the week of summer school. Feedback from the students indicates that this session increased their understanding of patient centred care and the importance of considering patient needs in all aspects of the care that nurses deliver.

References

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