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A dental student view on learning gained through Inter-Professional Engagement with people experiencing homelessness
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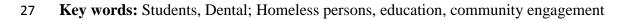
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5 **Abstract:**

6 Community engagement is an important element of the undergraduate programme at 7 the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Plymouth, United Kingdom. This report presents a project that a group of second year dental students 8 9 undertook with people experiencing homelessness, and provides an in-depth reflective 10 account of its impact on the students' learning. The project formed part of the students' interprofessional engagement module and delivered an intervention to enable residents at a 11 temporary accommodation centre to access dental treatment. As a result of the project, 14 12 residents received dental treatment. The groups' confidence in engaging with people 13 14 experiencing homelessness and their understanding of the complex needs of this group also 15 significantly improved. Community engagement modules can be an important learning tool for students' future practice and can help promote access to dental care for vulnerable 16 17 populations.

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1 Context

Community engagement is an important part of the undergraduate programme at the Faculty 2 of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Plymouth, (UK). In their second year as part of an 3 Inter-Professional Engagement (IPE) module, dental students work closely with a host 4 5 organisation in the community in order to develop and deliver an intervention to assist assisting disadvantaged populations to adopt healthy lifestyles. The objective of the module 6 is to promote students' understanding of the barriers that different groups in the community 7 have in maintaining good oral health routines and/or accessing dental care. It also seeks to 8 improve students' clinical and interpersonal skills in a non-clinical setting, thus equipping 9 10 them to provide a holistic care to their future patients.

11 This paper presents the IPE project that a group of students undertook with people 12 experiencing homelessness in Plymouth, and provides a reflective account of the impact of 13 the module on their learning.

14 **Project aim**

Taking into account the higher levels of untreated disease in this population [1-4] and the difficulties they have in accessing dental treatment [1-5], the main aim of the project was to enable residents at a temporary accommodation centre to access dental treatment at a clinic run by Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise (PDSE). The project also aimed to improve their knowledge on oral health and dental access in Plymouth, and improve their confidence about going to the dentist.

21 **Description**

22 Literature search

Prior to the project, the student group had little knowledge of homelessness and the
 challenges that people affected by homelessness face. In order to develop an understanding
 of the target group, a literature review was conducted to learn about the host organisation
 and the needs of its residents.

5 Fact finding discussions with key workers and prospective patients

Discussions with support workers and eight residents at the centre were conducted in order
to gain a deeper understanding of the target population's needs. The residents emphasised
that their main need was dental treatment. Notably, several reported that they had previously
extracted their own teeth or carried out DIY dentistry.

10 Thereafter, the students met on several occasions to discuss the feedback collected from the 11 focus groups and discussions with support workers, to plan a project that would meet 12 participants' needs. Accordingly, a triage and education station on aspects of oral health and 13 access to dental treatment were included in the project. The triage was carried out by a 14 student under the supervision of a qualified dentist, who then referred patients to PDSE for 15 treatment. All students had allocated roles and worked as a team to ensure that the triage and 16 education station activities ran efficiently.

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Please insert figure 1 here

18 **Outcomes**

The project was successful in engaging 14 residents to attend dental treatment, representing 20 25% of the centre's residents. This was significant, since national studies emphasise the 21 difficulty for homeless people in signing up to a dentist [5]. The learning gained confirmed 22 that the homeless population has significantly elevated levels of untreated dental decay and 23 periodontal disease compared to the general population. Furthermore, difficulties regarding 24 accessibility of dental care may be due to the unpredictable and chaotic lifestyles of people experiencing homelessness, as well as frequently-changing housing situations. This is a
 consideration which dental professionals should be aware of when treating their local
 populations as it may influence treatment planning.

Prior to starting this project, the psycho-social features associated with the homeless 4 5 population were not well understood by the students, who also held the belief that homeless people 'do not care for their health'. The community project enabled the group to engage 6 7 with members of the homeless population who, through their first-hand experiences, gave the students a much greater insight to the challenges they faced. Through extended 8 conversations, residents shared the circumstances that led them to become homeless, which 9 included being as simple as a family member passing away which left unpaid debts and bills, 10 resulting in them losing their house. This re-emphasised the statement from Shelter [6], that 11 'one third of the population are only 1 pay check away from homeless' and allowed students 12 to become more understanding of the reasons as to why oral health may not be an imminent 13 priority for people experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, it became evident that issues 14 15 such as complex mental health problems and substance misuse may influence motivation and 16 ability to make and keep appointments. Thus, based on the complex circumstances that they face, the barriers to care for homeless people were a lot greater than the students initially 17 anticipated. Some appear to be posed by dental professionals' responses to their needs, 18 19 indicating that the dental profession requires a deeper and more empathetic understanding of this population's vulnerability. 20

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A study by Masson and Lester [7], suggested that the attitudes of medical students towards homeless people were more negative at the end of their medical school training. This appeared to be influenced partly by observed attitudes and behaviors of senior staff who perceived homeless people as 'less worthy of medical care' than others. This contradicted the findings of the present project where students' negative preconceptions about homeless people had changed after the project. Where ours and Masson's and Lester's study [7] meet is in the influence of positive modelling of attitudes and the benefits of structured contact with patients who experience homelessness. The latter study [7] found that attitudes can harden over the course of a student's training, suggesting that encounters such as we experienced repeated over time with this vulnerable population might help sustain empathy.

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In addition to improved understanding of the complex needs of people who experience 8 9 homelessness, this module enabled students to improve their communication and team-10 working skills. Effective communication both with the University's support group (i.e. 11 community engagement programme officer and academic supervisor) and the project participants was essential for the successful development and implementation of the project. 12 13 It enabled students to explore participants' expectations and listen to their ideas in order to 14 create an intervention that is both wanted and going to be of greatest clinical value. Although sometimes challenging due to different perspectives among the group members, team-work 15 was essential for the distribution of workload among the group's members and the utilisation 16 of each one's strengths. The impact of the project on students' communication and team-17 working skills is significant, as these attributes can influence effective work in the clinical 18 19 setting.

20 Conclusions

Following the IPE project, the groups' confidence in engaging with people experiencing homelessness improved significantly. The students also improved their understanding of the diverse needs of vulnerable groups in the community and the complexity of promoting oral health interventions to them. The community engagement module at the Peninsula Dental School ensures that the students are not only immersed in the academic and clinical aspects

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of dentistry but are also aware of and equipped to carry out community dentistry. Such
modules can be an important learning tool for students' future practice and can help promote
access to dental care for vulnerable populations.

4 **Declaration of interest**

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- 11 PDSE staff

14

- 12 Our participants
- 13 **Figure captions**
- 15 Figure 1: Dental students alongside Wendy Smith and Abigail Nelder from the charity Well
- 16 Connected, Rob Witton, IPE module lead and Martha Paisi, academic supervisor.

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