

2019-07-15

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

Webb, L

<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/14664>

10.1080/14739879.2019.1636719

Education for Primary Care

Taylor & Francis

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

1 **A dental student view on learning gained through Inter-Professional Engagement with**
2 **people experiencing homelessness**

3

4 Leah Webb¹, Sumeet Sandhu^{1*}, Luke Morton¹, Robert Witton^{1,2}, Lyndsey Withers³,
5 Christina Worle², Martha Paisi¹

6

7 ¹University of Plymouth, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Peninsula Dental School,
8 Plymouth, United Kingdom.

9 leah.webb@students.plymouth.ac.uk
10 sumeet.sandhu@students.plymouth.ac.uk
11 luke.morton@students.plymouth.ac.uk
12 robert.witton@plymouth.ac.uk
13 martha.paisi@plymouth.ac.uk

14

15 ²Peninsula Dental Social Enterprise, Plymouth, United Kingdom.

16 christina.worle@nhs.net

17

18 ³Well Connected, Plymouth, United Kingdom.

19 lyndsey.withers@btinternet.com

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27 ***Corresponding author:**

28 Sumeet Sandhu

29 University of Plymouth,

30 Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry,

31 Peninsula Dental School,

32 Portland Square

33 Plymouth, Devon

34 PL4 8AA, United Kingdom

35 Tel: +44 (0)7500804092

36 Email: sumeet.sandhu@students.plymouth.ac.uk

37

1 **A dental student view on learning gained through Inter-Professional Engagement with**
2 **people experiencing homelessness**

3
4
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
8 Kingdom. This report presents a project that a group of second year dental students
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' inter-
11 professional engagement module and delivered an intervention to enable residents at a
12 temporary accommodation centre to access dental treatment. As a result of the project, 14
13 residents received dental treatment. The groups' confidence in engaging with people
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
16 for students' future practice and can help promote access to dental care for vulnerable
17 populations.

18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27 **Key words:** Students, Dental; Homeless persons, education, community engagement

1 **Context**

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

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

21 **Description**

22 *Literature search*

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

5 *Fact finding discussions with key workers and prospective patients*

6 Discussions with support workers and eight residents at the centre were conducted in order
7 to gain a deeper understanding of the target population's needs. The residents emphasised
8 that their main need was dental treatment. Notably, several reported that they had previously
9 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.

17 *Please insert figure 1 here*

18 **Outcomes**

19 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

1 experiencing homelessness, as well as frequently-changing housing situations. This is a
2 consideration which dental professionals should be aware of when treating their local
3 populations as it may influence treatment planning.

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

21
22 A study by Masson and Lester [7], suggested that the attitudes of medical students towards
23 homeless people were more negative at the end of their medical school training. This
24 appeared to be influenced partly by observed attitudes and behaviors of senior staff who
25 perceived homeless people as ‘less worthy of medical care’ than others. This contradicted the

1 findings of the present project where students' negative preconceptions about homeless
2 people had changed after the project. Where ours and Masson's and Lester's study [7] meet
3 is in the influence of positive modelling of attitudes and the benefits of structured contact
4 with patients who experience homelessness. The latter study [7] found that attitudes can
5 harden over the course of a student's training, suggesting that encounters such as we
6 experienced repeated over time with this vulnerable population might help sustain empathy.

7
8 In addition to improved understanding of the complex needs of people who experience
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
12 participants was essential for the successful development and implementation of the project.
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
15 sometimes challenging due to different perspectives among the group members, team-work
16 was essential for the distribution of workload among the group's members and the utilisation
17 of each one's strengths. The impact of the project on students' communication and team-
18 working skills is significant, as these attributes can influence effective work in the clinical
19 setting.

20 **Conclusions**

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

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

4 **Declaration of interest**

5 None

6 **Funding:** 'Well Connected' provided the goody bags.

7 **Word count:** 1152

8 **Acknowledgments**

9 Well Connected

10 Abigail Nelder (Community Engagement Programme Officer)

11 PDSE staff

12 Our participants

13 **Figure captions**

14

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.

17 **References**

- 18 1) Collins J, Freeman R. Homeless in North and West Belfast: an oral health needs
19 assessment. *BDJ*. 2007; 202:E31.
- 20 2) Coles E, Edwards M, Elliot GM, et al. The Oral Health of Homeless People across
21 Scotland: Report of the Homeless Oral Health Survey in Scotland, 2008-2009.
22 Dundee: University of Dundee, Dental Health Services Research Unit; 2011.
- 23 3) Daly B, Newton T, Batchelor P, et al. Oral health care needs and oral health-related
24 quality of life (OHIP-14) in homeless people. *Community Dent Oral Epidemiol*.
25 2010;38(2):136-44.
- 26 4) Simons D, Pearson N, Movasaghi Z. Developing dental services for homeless people
27 in East London. *BDJ*. 2012; 213(7):E11.
- 28 5) Groundswell. Healthy Mouths Report. London: Groundswell; 2017.

1 6) Shelter. One in three working families only one paycheque away from losing their
2 home. Shelter. 2016. Available from:

3 https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/articles/one_paycheque_away

4 7) Masson N, Lester H. The attitudes of medical students towards homeless people:
5 does medical school make a difference? Med Educ. 2003; 37(10):869-72.

6

7

8