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Improving medical students' research capacity through community-based projects

Peter L. McLennan

University of Wollongong, petermcl@uow.edu.au

Judy Mullan

University of Wollongong, jmullan@uow.edu.au

Kathryn M. Weston

University of Wollongong, kathw@uow.edu.au

Kylie J. Mansfield

University of Wollongong, kylie_mansfield@uow.edu.au

Warren C. Rich

University of Wollongong, wrich@uow.edu.au

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Word limit: 250

1. Title

Improving medical students' research capacity through community-based projects

2. Introduction:

The University of Wollongong 4-year medical curriculum embeds research and critical analysis, aiming to develop research-aware doctors practising evidence-based medicine. The course initially engenders critical analysis of relevant literature while introducing the broad principles of research methods and their interpretation. Students then put this into practice, by undertaking year-long community-based research projects during rural/regional clinical placement.

3. Objectives:

The ability of the projects to build research capacity was assessed in the first graduating cohort, by surveying them before and after the project using the "Research spider" self-assessment tool (Smith et al, *Primary Health Care Research and Development*; 2002; 3:139–140).

4. Issues for exploration:

Students were guided to design projects relevant to their own interests and the community. The effectiveness of this new enterprise was validated using the principles of evidence-based medicine engendered by the projects.

5. Results:

The 67 projects were varied, including clinical audits and patient surveys, covering a range of research methods. GSM staff provided academic supervision and all projects were subject to ethics evaluation.

Students improved in nine of the ten aspects of research that were assessed, from defining a research question, to presenting and writing a report. They showed no improvement in the capacity to apply for research funding.

6. Discussion:

The research projects engaged the students, stimulated them to think about research issues in rural and regional Australia, and measurably improved their research capacity.

7. Conclusions:

The programme meets our educational aims and promises to provide additional benefits through community engagement.