Enriching a medical curriculum with community-based public health projects: are there opportunities for inter-professional learning?

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Abstract
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Title: Enriching a Medical Curriculum with Community-Based Public Health Projects: are there Opportunities for Inter-Professional Learning?

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Background
The University of Wollongong graduate-entry medical course embeds research and critical analysis within the curriculum, concluding with the students designing and undertaking a 12-month regional/rural community-based research project.

Purpose
This study aimed to investigate the opportunities for inter-professional learning arising from medical student research projects directly relating to public health issues in regional communities.

Questions for exploration
Do community-based student projects provide an opportunity for value adding in learning about public health issues in a regional and rural setting? Do these opportunities extend beyond the students to include practice staff, university academics and others?

Results
Analysis of the 217 research projects topics undertaken by the first three medical student cohorts revealed that over 70% (n=153) related directly to key public health priority areas as listed by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and mental health. Other public health issues investigated included infant and women’s health, vaccination and communicable disease.

Discussion
All students successfully completed a community-based research project within the medical curriculum. These projects also allowed GP preceptors, academic staff, members of the community and practice staff to engage at various levels in public health issues and research.

Conclusions
Public health is a consistent theme of interest for medical students in regional/rural practice. Undertaking a community-based research project within a medical curriculum helps to develop research-readiness among graduating doctors and also provides opportunities for inter-professional learning and exposure to public health issues.