"I think I expected a situation a lot scarier than what it was". Role-emerging exercise physiology placement in a mental health service

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"I THINK I EXPECTED A SITUATION A LOT SCARIER THAN WHAT IT WAS"
ROLE-EMERGING EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGY PLACEMENT IN A MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE

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Introduction: Role-emerging placements are well utilised in allied health to enhance profession awareness and role development where they do not currently exist ¹, ². This innovative placement can meet a variety of stakeholder needs, including diversifying student learning experiences; enhancing placement capacity for education providers; addressing identified service needs; and influencing career choices for students ². Mental health is one area of identified need for exercise physiologist (EP) roles to address physical health challenges associated with serious mental illness (SMI), and to enhance holistic, collaborative healthcare for mental health consumers ³. Methods: This pragmatic study is one component of a larger partnership project, 'The ACTive Program'; developed between the University of Wollongong and Shellharbour Mental Health Rehabilitation Unit (MHRU). The pilot ACTive program ran for 18 weeks in 2013. Final year EP students worked with the MHRU’s interdisciplinary mental health team to deliver exercise and education components. Student experiences, knowledge, confidence and interest around mental health were evaluated using a pre and post survey (Likert scale; critical reflection). Results: 13 (out of 23) students volunteered for between 2 and 10 weeks. Preliminary grouped data shows positive changes from pre to post program, highlighting particular domains of knowledge of cardiometabolic conditions, impact of medications and team roles; and confidence for goal setting and prescribing appropriate exercise. Interest for further experience and work in mental health was consistent for pre and post program. Conclusion: Students valued the novel clinical placement, and reflected on changes in their preconceptions around SMI, enhanced confidence to utilise their skills with this population, and a heightened empathy for the challenges faced by both consumers and mental health professionals. This study has important implications for enhancing awareness and role opportunities for exercise physiologists in mental health services.