

Robust Interprofessional Clinical Education and Practice to Improve Health Equity

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to highlight innovative interprofessional clinical learning opportunities at a Nurse-led Mobile Health Clinic (MHC) that prepares nursing students and allied health students to care for diverse populations with a focus on screening for the social determinants of health (SDOH) and acting on positive screens. Our Nurse-led MHC provides free health screenings in partnership with food pantries and crisis ministries in urban and rural areas. We also provide self-management support classes for those with hypertension and/or diabetes.

Food insecurity is a risk factor for malnutrition, obesity, chronic diseases such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, kidney disorders, and mental health problems. Our MHC screens for the SDOH such as food insecurity, housing instability, and lack of transportation, with referrals in place for positive screens. When looking at health equity in America, lower-income individuals, such as those that access food pantries, report their health status at lower levels than high-income earners, yet only 58% of healthcare organizations consider health equity as a top-three priority, hence a need for education and innovation in healthcare to improve health.

Interprofessional education and practice (IPEP) along with experiential learning provides opportunities for students from many disciplines to work together as a collaborative team and provides both service to the community (high quality healthcare) and learning for the students. Our community partners and across campus students consists of many disciplines that includes nursing, social workers, nutritionists, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, health educators and language interpreters. Our undergraduate and graduate students have opportunities to volunteer, do clinical hours, practicums, self-management support classes and quality improvement (QI) projects with our faculty at our IPEP free health clinic.

Overall students' reflections from these practicum experiences support a deeper understanding on how food insecurity, homelessness and other SDOH impact one's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being (Cockroft et al., 2020). Nursing and IPEP does have a critical role to play in achieving the goal of health equity, and our MHC provides the opportunity for robust education!

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Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this paper is to enable the learner to:

- Increase their knowledge and understanding on how to incorporate interprofessional learning opportunities that prepare students to care for diverse populations with a focus on screening for the SDOH and acting on positive screens.
- Provide an example of a robust clinical interprofessional education and practice experience that mentors students to screen for high blood pressure, diabetes, CVD, obesity, depression with interventions/referrals available, and provide free health education, clinical services and self-management support, and resources to improve health outcomes.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to highlight innovative, interprofessional clinical learning opportunities at a Nurse-led Mobile Health Clinic (MHC) that prepares nursing students and allied health students to care for diverse populations with a focus on screening for the social determinants of health (SDOH) and then act on positive screens. Our Nurse-led MHC provides free health screenings in partnership with food pantries and crisis ministries in urban and rural areas. Free screenings include SDOH, tobacco use, blood pressure, diabetes, obesity, cardio-vascular disease risk assessment, depression, and vision with follow up and referrals for all positive screens. We also focus on health promotion with health education and primary prevention such as immunization clinics and school/sports physicals. Additionally, we provide self-management support classes for those with hypertension, diabetes and/or obesity.

Background and Significance

Food insecurity is a risk factor for malnutrition, obesity, chronic diseases such as hypertension, coronary heart disease, stroke,

cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, kidney disorders, and mental health problems [1].

The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity Report States:

A nation cannot fully thrive until everyone - no matter who they are, where they live, or how much money they make - can live their healthiest possible life, and helping people live their healthiest life is and has always been the essential role of nurses. Nurses have a critical role to play in achieving the goal of health equity, but they need robust education, supportive work environments, and autonomy [2].

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019 Report; "Integrating Social Care into the Delivery of Health Care: Moving Upstream to Improve the Nation's Health" presents the evidence on how social conditions shape health, and better integration of health care and social care services can improve health outcomes for individuals and populations [3].

The Centers for Disease Control and Healthy People 2030 have incorporated the SDOH into their population/patient assessment and overarching goals for health and wellbeing [4]. (Department of Health and Human Services). Health care providers are encouraged to screen for the SDOH to include food insecurity, housing instability, lack of transportation and interpersonal violence.

When looking at health equity in America, lower-income individuals, such as those that access food pantries, report their health status at lower levels than high-income earners, yet only 58% of healthcare organizations consider health equity as a top-three priority, hence a need for education and innovation in healthcare to improve health equity [5].

Interprofessional Teaching and Practice

As faculty, we focus on the SDOH in our undergraduate and graduate advance health assessment courses and incorporate it throughout the curriculum with the expectation that nursing students will include the SDOH in their assessment/plan for patient wellbeing and population health equity. We also teach nursing students and advance-practice RNs how to provide health promotion, primary, secondary prevention (screenings) and education along with assist individuals to self-manage their chronic disease(s).

Interprofessional education and practice (IPEP) along with experiential learning provides opportunities for students from many disciplines to work together as a collaborative team. This provides both service to the community and learning for the students. This allows for a team approach "to plan, deliver, and evaluate patient/population centered care and population health programs and policies that are safe, timely, efficient, effective, and equitable" [6]. At our university, we offer an elective experiential learning course to all the allied health sciences schools that allow graduate and undergraduate interprofessional students to have experiential learning at our nurse-led mobile health clinic (MHC) sites. Our MHC clinical sites are partnerships with food pantries and crisis ministries that want to provide health services to their clients, that are often uninsured, low income and have food insecurity. Our community partners and across campus students consist of many disciplines that include nursing, social workers, nutritionists, medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, health educators and language interpreters to provide wholistic, comprehensive healthcare.

At our MHC we screen all patients for key SDOH to include food and housing insecurity, difficulty with transportation and provide immediate referrals to social services, food pantries and community social agencies for positive screens for those desiring assistance. Our undergraduate and graduate students have opportunities to volunteer, do clinical hours, practicums, self-management support classes and quality improvement (QI) projects with our faculty at our IPEP free clinic sites.

Scholarly QI Projects have Included:

- Training Volunteers on How to Screen for the SDOH and Referring Patients to Community-Based Social Services,
- Creating Clinical System Changes to Address Food Insecurity, Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease (ASCVD risk) and Heart Health.
- Self-management Support Classes that Focus on Obesity, Diabetes and/or Hypertension Improvement for Low Income Patients.
- The Establishment of a Mental Health Screening Pathway Via the Implementation Of the PHQ-4 at the UNC Mobile Health Clinic.
- These scholarly QI projects help students to transform healthcare and improve the services that we offer clients.

Results

Overall students' reflections from these practicum experiences support a deeper understanding on how food insecurity, homelessness and other SDOH impact one's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being [7]. The food pantry community partnerships benefit from their clients receiving wholistic, high quality, free health education, screenings, and clinical services from an interprofessional health team. In 2023 our mobile health clinic's quality and safety was recognized at the highest national level:

The UNC School of Nursing Mobile Health Clinic received a Gold Rating from the National Association of Free and Charitable Clinics (NAFC). This recognition underscores the clinic's commitment to providing accessible and high-quality health care to medically underserved populations. (UNC SON News, May, 2023)

Nursing and IPEP does have a critical role to play in achieving the goal of health equity, and our MHC provides the opportunity for robust interprofessional education and practice! [8-10].

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