

# **Professor Patsy YATES**

Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation, Queensland University of Technology

## **Developing a Workforce to Improve Health Outcomes in Palliative Care: The National Palliative Care Curriculum for Undergraduates Project**

### **Abstract**

The Palliative Care Curriculum for Undergraduates (PCC4U) Project is an initiative of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing which aims to promote the delivery of quality palliative care that is accessible to all people who are dying, by educating all new graduates in the health professionals in the principles and practices of palliative care. As part of the project, a range of evidence based palliative care undergraduate curriculum resources have been developed, along with a set of recommended strategies for promoting uptake and optimising outcomes at a student, organisational and systems level.

The strategies focus on the design and use of the learning resources themselves, individual teaching staff, the wider academic and professional community, and the organisational, political and regulatory context of health professional education. Following successful piloting of these implementation strategies in nine undergraduate health courses across medicine, nursing and allied health disciplines in 2005, a plan for actively promote the uptake of the PCC4U resources in all other universities in Australia which offer medical, nursing, and allied health undergraduate training was developed and is currently being implemented.

Key indicators for evaluating outcomes from the project include learning outcomes for students who participate in the program, curriculum outcomes, in terms of the extent to the core principles have been incorporated and academic outcomes, in terms of usefulness and effectiveness of the resources. Additionally, key system level outcomes from this initiative are also being assessed. These system level outcomes include networks, partnerships, and other factors which influence health outcomes for people requiring palliative care.

## **Aims and Objectives**

Achieving optimal health outcomes for our community is influenced to a large extent by the capabilities and qualities of our health workforce. People who are dying come into contact with a wide range of health professionals at various points in the illness journey, each of whom must be capable of provide safe and quality care if we are to ensure best outcomes for this population. However, the literature (Barzansky et al. 1999; Block 2002; Burney-Blanfield 1994), and our own scoping studies, suggests there is considerable variation in the extent to which palliative care concepts are addressed in the education of health professionals. Such variation in the preparation of health professionals for practice is likely to contribute to variation in health outcomes for people who are dying.

The purpose of the Palliative Care Curriculum for Undergraduates Project (PCC4U) is to promote the delivery of quality palliative care that is accessible to all people who are dying, by educating all new graduates in the health professionals in the principles and practices of palliative care. Specifically, the objectives of the PCC4U project are to:

- Promote the inclusion in all health care training of the role of palliative care and its principles and practice in the care of dying people; and
- Support the inclusion of palliative care education as an integral part of all medical, nursing, and allied health undergraduate training.

## **Project Components**

### **Phase 1:**

The first phase of the PCC4U project comprised a range of activities including literature reviews, scoping of current curricula, surveys and focus group discussions. These activities resulted in the development of a series of learning resources, including:

- A publication entitled Principles for Including Palliative Care in Undergraduate Curricula;
- An interactive CD-ROM and accompanying facilitator guide, based on the principles identified;
- A resource compendium;
- A video learning resource.

Importantly, this phase of the project resulted in development of a set of graduate capabilities in palliative care. These capabilities were seen as the essential requirements to be demonstrated by graduates from any courses preparing health professionals for practice, if we are to achieve quality outcomes for people who are dying. These graduate capabilities are presented in Table 1.

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Effective communication in the context of an individual's responses to loss and grief, existential challenges, uncertainty and changing goals of care.</b></li><li><b>2. Appreciation of and respect for the diverse human and clinical responses of each individual through their illness trajectory.</b></li><li><b>3. Understanding of principles for assessment and management of clinical and supportive care needs.</b></li><li><b>4. The capacity for reflection and self evaluation of one's professional and personal experiences and their curriculum and their cumulative impact on the self and others.</b></li></ol> |
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*Table 1: Graduate Capabilities in Palliative Care*

## Phase 2:

The second phase of the PCC4U project implemented over 2005-2006 involved the successful implementation and evaluation of the learning resources into three medical, four nursing, and three allied health courses in metropolitan and rural universities in Australia.

An evaluation plan was developed that could be tailored for use in implementation sites. The evaluation was intended to enable report on a broad range of outcomes across various levels (e.g., student; teacher; organisational; health services), and thus enable recommendations to be made regarding future developments in undergraduate palliative care education. Data was collected from a number of sources, including data collected from each implementation site as a specific 'case study'.

These pilot projects demonstrated positive outcomes on all indicators, including student learning outcomes, academic staff involvement and abilities in developing graduate capabilities in palliative care, evidence of inclusion of the identified principles in curricula, extent of uptake of the resources in curricula, and linkages between academic and clinical staff in developing graduate capabilities in palliative care. The pilot implementation projects also provided important insights into the implementation strategies that would be most likely to achieve sustainable and widespread outcomes from the project.

## Phase 3:

Building on the recommendations from the previous phase of the project, the third phase of the PCC4U project, currently in progress, aims to:

- Actively promote the uptake of the PCC4U resources in all other universities in Australia which offer medical, nursing, and allied health undergraduate training;
- Maintain and nurture the networks that have developed between participating universities and their faculties;
- Extend the networks to include the universities and faculties which take up the curriculum in the future;
- Develop strategies for the ongoing sustainability of the PCC4U project;
- Maintain the existing newsletter for stakeholders and information website.

To achieve these aims, an implementation strategy has been developed. This strategy is described in Table 2.

Stages of Implementation	Strategies
Stage 1 Awareness	Invitation extended by email to universities to participate in the project.
Stage 2 Informing	Universities invited to review the resources and complete a mapping exercise highlighting any barriers, concerns and a possible timetable for implementation.
Stage 3 Engaging	Universities visited by the Project Team Member and Project Coordinator projects. Letter of agreement to participate signed by participating sites.
Stage 4 Implementing	Sites implement the PCC4U resources through integration and customisation of resources.
Stage 5 Networking	Sites involved invited to act as mentors for new implementation sites, and to develop a series of case studies regarding implementation strategies. A shared teaching website is being developed.

Stage 6 Evaluation	Data collection using evaluation templates to evaluate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning outcomes</li> <li>• Curriculum outcomes</li> <li>• System outcomes.</li> </ul>
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**Table 2: PCC4U Implementation Strategy**

To promote sustainability and optimise outcomes from the project, a series of workshops designed to develop teaching skills in palliative care are being planned. In addition, ongoing linkages continue to be developed with professional and regulatory bodies. A number of groups have indicated interest in the PCC4U project and have endorsed the principles document. Information about the project (newsletter, fact sheet) continues to be distributed to all relevant professional and regulatory bodies.

### **Project Outcomes**

An evaluation plan has been developed based on The Project Evaluation Framework developed by The University of Wollongong's Centre for Health Service Development. Using this framework, key indicators demonstrating effective outcomes from the project have been adapted from those developed in previous phases of the PCC4U project, and include:

- learning outcomes for students who participate in the program
- curriculum outcomes, in terms of the extent to the principles have been incorporated and factors which have influenced the uptake
- academic outcomes, in terms of usefulness, effectiveness and of the resources, and factors which influence these outcomes
- system outcomes, in terms of networks, partnerships, and other factors which influence outcomes.

In addition a brief annual audit of all implementation sites is being undertaken to monitor maintenance of palliative care within curricula and any ongoing developments. A further scoping of curricula, similar to that undertaken in Phase 1 of the project in 2004, will be undertaken towards the end of this third phase of the project (end 2009).

While this phase of the project is in its early stages of implementation, evaluation to date is promising. Around 25% of health courses have reported implementing the PCC4U principles and learning resources, with many more developing plans for implementation over the next 12 months. Many of those sites implementing the resources have provided qualitative and quantitative evidence of positive outcomes at the student, academic and curriculum level. By promoting the inclusion of quality, evidence based resources that are focused on achieving graduate capabilities recognised as being important to ensuring good health outcomes for people who are dying, it is expected that this project will contribute to improvement quality of care for this population.

### **References**

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