

Can virtual international exchanges enhance doctors global health competencies? Views from GP trainees

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID pandemic has highlighted how interconnected our world is and the importance of healthcare professionals having a good understanding of current and emerging global health threats and challenges. It is clear that medical educators need to 'go global' and review postgraduate training programmes to ensure that doctors are 'fit for the future' and have adequate global health knowledge and skills (1,2). The traditional approach to developing global health competencies was through overseas medical electives and exchanges but these are likely to be limited for the foreseeable future and the opportunities were often best suited to junior doctors who had fewer work and family commitments. 'Virtual international exchanges' may be a more practical alternative and an innovative pedagogical approach to developing global health skills and competence.

METHOD

All ST123 GP trainees on the Health Education Wessex Dorset GP Vocational Training Scheme were sent survey monkey questionnaires asking about their perceived competence in global health, its importance and whether they were interested in participating in a virtual international exchange programme. Intercultural competency was defined for them as "the ability to function effectively across cultures, to think and act appropriately, and to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds".

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements as well as free text questions exploring their ideas on VIEs.

RESULTS

60 GP trainees responded to the survey (response rate = 74%). 75% female and 25% male. 33% GP trainees gained their medical qualification outside the UK and 80% of these doctors had also practised medicine outside of the UK. 85% would consider working outside of the UK again.

Only 25% doctors who qualified within the UK had practised medicine outside the UK and 100% would consider working outside the UK in the future.

The majority of doctors agreed that it was important for UK GP trainees to learn about global health (see Table 1) and in free text boxes gave a range of reasons.

"We live in a global world and in the UK have culturally diverse communities"

"part of general medical expertise - can be relevant in unexpected ways in any setting"

"We may have patients who have migrated to the UK who have received treatment in their previous countries, we can also learn from other countries and can implement good practices from there"

Table 1: GP trainees perception of the importance of global health competencies

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
It is important for UK GP trainees to learn about global health	97%	2%	2%
It is important for UK GP trainees to develop 'intercultural competence'	98%	0%	2%
VIE could enhance GP training in the UK	76%	15%	9%

Table 2: GP trainees self rated knowledge and intercultural competence

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
How would you rate your knowledge of global health?	26%	46%	28%
How would you rate your intercultural competence?	54%	39%	7%

GP TRAINEES VIEWS ON VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGES

76% GP trainees agreed with the statement that 'Virtual international exchanges with healthcare professionals from overseas could enhance GP training in the UK' and 62% were personally interested in participating in a VIE. The quotes below are reflective of free text responses to the following questions:

What would UK GP trainees gain from taking part in VIE?

"To improve communication skills ... to get an idea of what is more important to some communities"

"Gaining cultural understanding of medicine with different perspectives. Gain tools to enhance clinical skills with patients of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and experiences"

"Broader understanding of health, alternative view points and methodology, challenges to the 'way things are done', potential to invite change"

How could participation in virtual international exchanges enhance the quality of health care you give to your patients here in the UK?

"A better understanding of previous experiences or expectations of patients who have lived abroad"

"Could we manage conditions differently? Could we change health care provision in the long term?"

How could participation in virtual international exchanges impact on your ability to work with international colleagues here in the UK?

"my international colleagues ... are no different to my UK trained colleagues, we all bring our own unique experiences to the table and I think we learn from each other. A zoom experience would not be as natural. And the curriculum is already pretty full"

"would give you an idea of how their training works, and working environment that they're used to so you can empathise or understand better the ways in which they may work differently to you"

Practically, have you any ideas on how virtual international exchanges could work?

"Zoom lectures from GPs abroad" *"Small groups with facilitators"*

Can you foresee any challenges, or barriers, to the success of virtual international exchanges?

"lots! focus, technology, participation" *"covid, workload, time zone differences"*

STAKEHOLDER DISCUSSIONS

A series of online meetings were held to discuss the benefits, challenges and practicalities with various stakeholders including GP Programme directors, trainees, Bournemouth University Global Engagement Leads and directors from Knowledge4Change which has an established record of running successful international exchanges. The potential benefits for both UK and overseas health professionals were clear but significant logistical challenges emerged including: matching appropriate healthcare professionals from two very different health care structures, access to technology, availability of staff, time zones, different expectations of benefits, possible requirement for financial remuneration, time pressures in the midst of a pandemic.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID pandemic has forced us to move more education and training online and, although this has brought challenges, it has forced medical educators to think in new and innovative ways. We live and work in a multicultural, global world and it is clear that GPs on the frontline of the NHS need opportunities to develop their intercultural competence and knowledge of relevant global health challenges. Virtual international exchanges may offer an interesting approach to enhance doctors education and to develop sustainable links between primary care clinicians internationally. However, these need to be thought through carefully and the logistics are challenging. For further updates on our project please contact the authors directly.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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- Watson J, Shiner A, Pettigrew L, Irving G. Global health: Time for full time integration into GP education. *British Journal of General Practice* 2013, 63(610): 271-272.