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Stories of change

PEOPLE WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE JOIN ZOOM CALLS ENABLING FINAL YEAR MEDICAL STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND LIFE WITH CHRONIC PAIN

Queen's University Medical Students have been participating in remote consultations during their GP placements.

What we did

As GPs and medical student teachers we want to provide more opportunities for future doctors to listen to real patient stories. We worked with Versus Arthritis and discussed how we might achieve our goal. The charity recruited patient volunteers who agreed to share their experiences of living with pain in a small group setting. Over a 12 week period, more than 280 final year students from Queen's University, Belfast (in groups of 12 or less) were invited to attend a 60 minute ZOOM session on a Friday afternoon. Versus Arthritis provided a patient for each session, along with a reserve in case of illness. The sessions provided these "doctors of tomorrow" with a unique insight into the true impact of chronic pain on someone's daily life.



Our motivation

The Covid19 pandemic has limited opportunities for medical students to talk to patients in depth when on placement in General Practice.

Our students need to learn more about how to holistically support and manage patients with chronic pain (NICE guideline (NG193) published April 2021).

The difference we are making

Volunteer feedback was excellent.

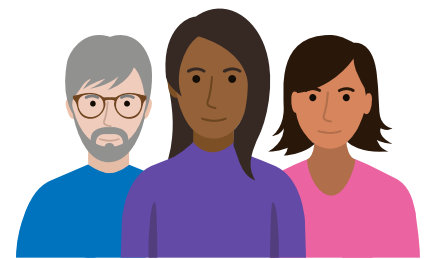
An anonymous student survey demonstrated:

- A significant increase in the student self-rating of knowledge of management options for chronic pain
- Increased understanding of how pain impacted on so many areas of a patient's life.
- High value placed on speaking with a real patient.

What's next?

Queen's University launched a new medical school curriculum in 2020. It is committed to involving real patients in student learning in a meaningful way. This project is a great example of co-production. It is hoped that students in earlier years of medical school will be able to access similar learning opportunities.

The success of this project has also prompted interest from others working in post-graduate GP specialty training.





“Learning experiences are much more valuable and memorable when the patient is the centre of the session. The excellent feedback we have received from students and volunteers has prompted the medical school to consider using similar models in other parts of the curriculum”

Top tips

- Versus Arthritis provides a broad range of high-quality free resources to assist student learning. These were highlighted to the students before the session.
- Value can be added by bringing in external organisations to work alongside a medical school in student education.
- Focus on learning outcomes so that the work aligns with academic processes.
- Technology problems can occur so prepare well and include contingency plans.
- Ensure there are reserve volunteers in case of illness.
- All patient stories bring value even though some seem more complex than others
- GP tutors provided statistics on opioid prescribing and the prevalence of chronic pain to give context to the session.
- Facilitated discussion allowed students to reflect on the impact of chronic pain as a long term condition.

Want to know more?



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Making change happen

2.3 million opioid drugs are prescribed in Northern Ireland each year. Such high levels of drug use in a small population are thought to be partly related to the “Troubled” past. It is essential that we prepare our future doctors to manage patients with chronic pain holistically, not solely depending on medication as the treatment of choice. Students were encouraged to read information emailed to them in advance of the session including links to the Versus Arthritis website resources and NICE guideline. A lyric from the band “The Verve” highlighted a key message from the session: **“The drugs don’t work; they just make you worse.”**

A short meeting was held via ZOOM for all the volunteers before the first session occurred. This ensured volunteers were comfortable with the format and structure of the session. Once all students joined, they were reminded about patient confidentiality and professionalism in this virtual setting, and to keep their cameras on if possible. A Versus Arthritis staff member was also at each virtual session to support the volunteer if needed. To maximise the learning experience for the students, the volunteers were encouraged not to offer their diagnosis. This ensured the students took a careful history before being asked to offer a diagnosis. Finally, patients would provide some top tips to these future doctors when supporting people living with chronic pain. Suggestions included **“don’t fob us off, don’t tell us it’s all in our head, listen to us.”** After the patient and Versus Arthritis representative left the session, students received 15 minutes of formal teaching on alternatives to medication in chronic pain including self-management programmes.

Student attendance at these sessions was high. In the feedback they asked for more individual opportunities to directly interact with patients in this format (only 2 of the group of 10-12 were able to take a history first-hand). Delivering sessions via ZOOM avoided the need for anyone to travel and this was considered particularly helpful to those living with chronic pain. In 20-21, doctors in their final year of GP post-graduate training voted a similar project “the best day of training” from the year.

**VERSUS
ARTHRITIS**