

Learning by Living Nursing Home Immersion: Medical Students Live the Life of an Older Nursing Home Residents

Introduction:

The University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine Learning by Living Project (referred to as *Learning by Living* in this *précis*) was piloted in 2006. It was designed and implemented as an experiential medical education learning model by the Director of Geriatrics Education and Research within the Medical School's Department of Geriatric Medicine [now the Division of Geriatrics]. Since its inception, medical and other health professions students have been "admitted" into nursing homes to live the life of an older nursing home resident for approximately two weeks – 24/7 (24 hours a day/7 days a week) – complete with a medical diagnosis and "standard" procedures of care. The *Learning by Living* project immersed students in fourteen different nursing homes in four states. No funding is needed for this program as nursing homes provide a bed, meals, staff care, and daily life events for no cost. However, the home receives a copy of the student journal, a debriefing session with an audience of their choice (i.e. board members, staff, residents), and the opportunity of media coverage.

Purpose:

The purpose of the Learning by Living Nursing Home Immersion Project is to provide medical students and other health professions students with firsthand experiences of living the life of an older adult nursing home resident to answer the question: "*What is it like for me to live the life of an older adult nursing home resident?*" And from this experience, be thoughtful about how the answers to this question can aid the student in becoming a better physician or health care practitioner.

Background:

Until this project, Long Term Care education in nursing homes was accomplished through traditional medical education methods~ episodic encounters in the environment with no continuity. According to White (2008), "Long-term care services represent a growing aspect of our medical system that receives little attention in medical education" (pg 75). Furthermore, medical student training and experiences in nursing homes is often viewed as negative, which mirrors the views expressed by the general public (White, 2008). The truth is, in our society, nursing homes receive negative attention. This project is based on two premises for medical education in nursing homes: (1) older adults residing in nursing homes are human beings deserving of good care, respect, and "community" connection; and (2) medical students can attain medical care skills including advanced relationship building skills with older adults from living the life of an older nursing home resident.

Story Behind Project Inception:

In 2006, the first medical student was "admitted" into a Maine nursing home to live the life of an older nursing home resident. After a lecture by Dr Gugliucci to first year medical students at the University of New England College of Osteopathic Medicine (UNE COM), a 23-year-old female medical student expressed a desire "to learn how to speak with institutionalized elders." There was a pregnant pause as Dr Gugliucci mentally assessed what the student was asking and realized stating the obvious 'you would talk with older adults as you would talk with adults in general,' was not the answer to augment student learning. Instead, Dr Gugliucci asked the student if she would live the life of an older nursing home resident for 2 weeks so she could ascertain her own answer. The student's eyes grew large and then she agreed. Rana Wakim, MS I, was admitted into Cedar Ridge Nursing Home in Skowhegan, ME in June 2006 as if she were an older adult. Each summer since then, Dr Gugliucci has admitted students into nursing homes, with one gerontology student spending 10 weeks living the life of an older resident in 3 different nursing homes to fulfill a college internship experience.

Project Details:

Research Design: This project is based on qualitative ethnographic/autobiographic research design deemed as “Exempt” by the UNE Institutional Review Board.

Targeted population and geographic area: This program is intended to provide medical students in training with firsthand experience of living the life of an older adult. Maine nursing homes were initially utilized; however, the program has expanded into 4 states. Although this program was designed for medical students, other health professions students have participated in this immersion. Those in graduate level education are preferable; students need to be 21 years of age. Each student resides in the nursing home for 10-14 days – 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Methods: Medical students (as well other students and an architect) volunteer to conduct this research. They complete a registration form that lists demographic data as well as their assumptions about older adults and nursing homes. The student is oriented by Dr Gugliucci, who also orients the Nursing Home administrator and select staff prior to the student’s admission date. As part of ethnographic data collection methods, students are required to write a journal starting 3 days before admission (pre-fieldwork), while living in the nursing home (fieldwork), and for 3 days after discharge (post-fieldwork).

While the student is living in the nursing home, Dr Gugliucci reviews student notes and maintains contact with the student during his/her stay – as a daughter might for a parent. Constant review of students’ field notes is critical to ensure data collection is effective and meets qualitative research standards. This process also monitors each student’s well being as s/he experiences a new culture. Based on past developments in qualitative ethnographic research and in this project in particular, the 10-14 day period assists with: (1) allowing the nursing home staff and residents to become desensitized to the new resident (the student) so that daily activities fall into routine again (days 1-3); (2) allowing the student to experience the changes in shifts from weekdays to weekends (days 1-8); (3) providing the student with feeling that they are part of the culture (days 6-14); and (4) permitting time to build relationships with residents in the nursing home (days 8-14). To date, nursing homes have provided a bed, meals, activities, and care at no cost; they participate in the student debriefing session at the day of discharge and receive a copy of the completed journal.

Data Analysis:

Data for this project are collected in the form of subjective and objective note taking (field notes). Data (students’ quotes from their notes) are analyzed and categorized into themes revealing key impressions and experiences of life lived as an older adult nursing home resident, relationships formed, and lessons learned. Evaluation is ongoing as data continues to be collected with each new student “admission.”

Project Outcomes and Assessment:

To date, all students have completed their extended stay successfully and stated that this experiential learning project provided life altering medical education. Each student receives a research citation for their *Curriculum Vitae* as they are conducting medical education research. They also have the opportunity to present their research and some have published their experiences in juried journals. [See *Media Links below*]

Longitudinal data reveals that students maintain patient-centered attitudes and skills such as the use of eye contact, touch, body position, and voice cadence with patients of all ages; and are conscious about being “present” or “in the moment” with the person they are working with. Barriers to working with older adults are decreased; understanding is gained by “walking/wheeling in an older person’s shoes/wheelchair.”

Key factors in medical care knowledge learned from being immersed are: (1) importance of physical touch when working with patients; (2) enhancement of communication by being at eye level with the patient, whether they are in a bed, a wheelchair, or on a treatment table; (3) communication with authenticity and sincerity ~ the importance of being comfortable within self and sharing that with

patients; and (4) connection with and treating the person rather than the diseases or frailties they may present with. These are remarkable lessons learned within a 2-week span of time and have been shown to be maintained as students continue their clinical training in medical education.

Nursing home administrators expressed that the staff learning resulting from this experience works better than many of their in-service training sessions on care of older residents. Having a student live the life of a resident raises consciousness for all involved. A byproduct of the immersion for the nursing home were enhancements in living environments for their residents (such as mirror height, bedroom/bathroom set up to reach lamps or toilet paper) and increased staff sensitivity. *“The fact that the students were so into their roles enhanced staff sensitivity and compassion. This was real and provided a window of opportunity to learn from the inside out”* (Administrator, Sarah Neuman Home).

Citation for Staff & Student Outcomes: **Gugliucci, M.R.** & Weiner, A. (2012) *Learning by Living: Life Altering Medical Education through Nursing Home Based Experiential Learning*, *Journal of Gerontology & Geriatrics Education*, Vol 34/Issue 1, (60-77), DOI:10.1080/02701960.2013.749254

Future Goal for the Learning by Living Project:

In 2013 the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine awarded Dr. Gugliucci with the *Society of Osteopathic Medical Educators (SOME) Marguerite Elliot Innovations in Clinical Medical Education Award for the Learning by Living: Life Altering Nursing Home Immersion Research and Medical Education Project*. UNE COM appears to be the only medical school in the country that has implemented such a project to “admit” students into nursing homes for extended periods to live the life of an older resident. The program was put on hold in the summer of 2020 and has not resumed due to COVID 19 and continued staff shortages.

Footnote: White, H.K. (2008) *The nursing home in long-term care education*, JAMDA, 9:75-81.

Select Media Links:

Aging Without Wrinkles Radio Show, Alliance, OH, Host: Harriet Traimer. Discussion Topics: “Learning by Living Nursing Home Immersion Project and the 48 Hour Hospice Home Immersion Project.” October 5, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsleiBzGwbY&feature=youtu.be>

Bangor Daily News, Bangor ME. Authors: Joshua Allen, OMS III & Marilyn Gugliucci, PhD. Opinion Editorial Article Title: “What a medical student learned after living in a nursing home for 10 days.” August 26, 2016. <http://bangordailynews.com/2016/08/19/opinion/contributors/what-a-medical-student-learned-after-living-in-a-nursing-home-for-10-days/>

CBS Nightly News, (November 26,, 2010) CBS News Correspondent: Jim Axelrod, Producer: Andy Wolff; Story on Learning by Living© Project featuring M. Sharbaugh, UNECOM MS II, Chelsea Soldiers Home, Chelsea MA; S. C. Kim, UMDNJ MS IV, Jewish Life Care Home, Manhattan, NY; and M. Gugliucci. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/11/26/eveningnews/main7092796.shtml>

The DO Journal (March 29, 2011) [Age-old insights: UNECOM student experiences life inside a nursing home](http://www.do-online.org/TheDO/). <http://www.do-online.org/TheDO/>. Osteopathic Medical Student Spotlight Article.

Boston Globe, Metro Section, (July 19, 2010) Learning by Living© Project Article entitled: He's Not a Patient, But Plays One for Class: Medical Students Learn Geriatrics in Role of Patient. Staff Writer: June Wu. Note: This article was posted on 200 websites, pp.B1 & B3.

New York Times Article, Health Section, (August 24, 2009) Learning by Living Recognition: Experiencing Life, Briefly, Inside a Nursing Home. ~ Learning by Living© Project designed and implemented by M Gugliucci: Medical students live the life of an elder nursing home resident for 2 weeks (24/7). Article in the NY Times was reprinted in 181+ newspapers nationally.
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/24/health/24nursing.html?_r=0