

Future Physicians Make New 'Old Friends'

Written by Kristian Partington

It's no secret the fastest growing segment of Canada's population is older adults over the age of 65. Recognizing that the Canadian medical system must evolve in order to meet the needs of this aging population, a new experiential learning program is encouraging future physicians to gain new understanding of older adults' perspectives.

Developed in partnership between McMaster University's M.G. DeGroot School of Medicine and the RIA, the 'Make a New Old Friend' pilot study is pairing first year medical students from McMaster with older adults living in long-term care and retirement settings. On a regular basis, the students will spend time getting to know their partners, speaking with them and learning their history and the nature of their current lifestyle.

The program's lead developer and researcher, Andrew Costa, is the Schlegel Research Chair in Clinical Epidemiology & Aging and also Research Director with the Waterloo Campus of the DeGroot School of Medicine. He says considering the fact that an estimated 60 per cent of all current physician's patients (excluding paediatricians) are seniors, it's imperative that new medical students be exposed to this segment of the population.

"We still teach physicians the same way we've always taught from 30 years ago," Andrew points out, noting that the philosophy is very much focused on

Enhancing Life

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The Schlegel-UW Research Institute for Aging aims to enhance the quality of life and care of older adults through partnerships in research, education and practice. Innovations are developed and tested in the Schlegel Villages, and then shared to benefit older adults everywhere.

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specialities in particular organ systems. This works for younger people, who can visit a specialist to focus on one issue as it may arise, “but the thing with older adults is they can have multiple problems that are all interrelated; no one really gets that, no one is responsible for the total.”

Despite the changing demographics, medical students in Canada today spend a mere 21 hours during their education focused on older adults, whereas the reality is, most will require a detailed understanding of the complexities old age can present.

The hope is that by exposing more students to the lives of older adults, ‘Make a New Old Friend’ will increase their competence in that field of care, enhance their communication skills with older adults and help them explore potential career pathways they hadn’t considered.

The program, currently being piloted with students from McMaster’s Waterloo campus and residents from Winston Park and University Gates, is part of a three-pronged approach to encourage future physicians trained at McMaster to better understand older adults’ realities.

“If students can develop a certain comfort,” Andrew says, “they’ll look at older adults differently because the stories they know from their ‘old friend’, they’ll take that with them and they’ll hopefully apply that to all older adults.”

They’ll see much more than a diagnosis, he adds.

“They’ll see the life stories behind them.”

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