

Hands-on learning key to co-op students

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Since the University of Waterloo launched the first Canadian pharmacy co-op program in January 2008, Ontario pharmacists have become increasingly aware of the valuable hands-on opportunities that experiential learning can offer to undergraduate students. Throughout the four years of their pharmacy studies, Waterloo pharmacy students are exposed to a variety of real-life pharmacy experiences during their co-op placements. Students also bring their practical learning back to the classroom to further their knowledge and skills.

The patient safety curriculum at the School of Pharmacy, University of Waterloo, introduces students to the Medication Safety Self Assessment® (MSSA), a tool that will help health care practitioners assess medication safety in their practice setting or pharmacy. The MSSA was originally developed by the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) in the United States. A Canadian version

of the MSSA tool has been developed by the Institute for Safe Medication Practices Canada (ISMP Canada) and pharmacy students at the School of Pharmacy have received in-class training on how to perform this assessment. The MSSA tool consists of a series of self-assessment items (with multiple choice options) and analyzes medication safety based on 10 key elements, ranging from patient information, drug information, communication of drug orders, to environmental factors, staff and patient education, etc. Completion of the MSSA usually takes two to three hours. However, dividing the MSSA exercise or discussion among staff members into two or three one-hour sessions may be a more feasible option for most pharmacy practice settings. Further information on *MSSA for Community/Ambulatory Pharmacy* and *MSSA for Long Term Care* can be found in the November/December 2005 and November/December 2007 issues of *Pharmacy Connection* or by visiting the ISMP Canada web site at www.ismp-canada.org/mssa.htm.

A research initiative entitled “Making Patient Safety Real: An Outcome-Driven Classroom to Co-op and Back Again”, which aims to measure how co-op experiences complement students’ classroom learning (and vice versa), was also brought to the attention of pharmacy students and co-op employers in 2009. One component of this research initiative involves the administration of MSSA in the student’s co-op placement (where drug distribution or direct patient care is available). With the employer’s consent to conduct a MSSA, the pharmacy student works with other staff members at his or her placement, completes the safety assessment, and identifies opportunities for quality improvement and medication safety initiatives.

Co-op work terms are great opportunities for University of Waterloo pharmacy students to gain knowledge and skills through real life pharmacy experience. Employers or preceptors offer students valuable experiential learning. At the same time, pharmacy students can contribute to enhancing patient safety in pharmacy practice settings by adopting what they learn. 