Investigating socio-cultural barriers to volunteerism in a medical school volunteer patient program: A program development project

Travis Schroeder, BSc, Rajiv Dhatt, BSc, Jean Hudson, MSc, MD, Joyce Nyhof-Young, BSc, MSc, PhD
Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto

Background

Mississauga is one of the most diverse communities in the Greater Toronto region and has the highest percentages of Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh populations in Ontario (1). Almost half (47%) of the population has a mother tongue other than English or French, and 27% speak a non-official language.

VP perspectives and experiences with the PPP program

Nearly all VPs agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: I enjoyed the volunteer experience, the sign-up process was easy, I was treated respectfully by doctors, I am treated respectfully by staff, I am likely to volunteer again, I am likely to recommend the PPP program to a friend.

Motivations to volunteer with the PPP Program

The main motivators for volunteering were: to improve the quality of the healthcare system and to feel good about themselves. VPs did not feel they were volunteering to fulfill a religious or belief obligation, to improve their resume or because they have friends or family who have volunteered.

Barriers to Volunteering in the PPP Program

The major barriers to volunteering were: lack of awareness of the PPP program, not knowing how to become a VP, not being able to take time off work, inconvenient timing of volunteer sessions, and lack of volunteer training and increased workload.

Methods

In June 2012, the MAM launched a volunteer program, "Patients Playing a Part" (PPP) to recruit socio-culturally diverse VPs. To support barriers to volunteerism and garner suggestions for improving the PPP program, the existing 85 VPs were surveyed using semi-structured questionnaires.

Research Objectives

• To examine how socioeconomic status and ethnicity influence community engagement in the PPP program
• To assess the volunteer patient experience
• To explore barriers and motivators for volunteerism
• To make recommendations for increasing the number of diverse volunteers in the program

Similarly, short answer responses indicated that the top four barriers to participation were:

1. Awareness of the public in general are not just aware of the program
2. Timing: VPs reported the timing of the volunteer sessions (Thursday and Friday mornings) as prohibitive. One VP noted, “The time factor is the greatest deterrent - younger people are at work and cannot take time off. Seniors already volunteering do not want to take on additional responsibility.”
3. Privacy: Volunteers commented on comfort levels with physical touch and personal disclosure and “many people are very private and do not want to disclose many personal information.”
4. Communication: Several volunteers felt “they were not well informed” about their VP role and lacked “preparation and instruction.”

Results

Demographics of VPs

Demographic data show that the majority of VPs identify as white, are retired, and speak English at home. Canadian born and have university education. Roughly equal numbers of males and females responded.

VP Experiences with the PPP Program

Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>First Language Spoken at Home</th>
<th>Country of Birth</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>Post graduate/Professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Prefer not to answer</td>
<td>University - undergraduate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motivations to Volunteer with the PPP Program

The main motivators for volunteering were: to improve the quality of the healthcare system and to feel good about themselves. VPs did not feel they were volunteering to fulfill a religious or belief obligation, to improve their resume or because they have friends or family who have volunteered.

Barriers to Volunteering in the PPP Program

The major barriers to volunteering were: lack of awareness of the PPP program, not knowing how to become a VP, not being able to take time off work, inconvenient timing of volunteer sessions, and lack of volunteer training and increased workload.

Future Directions

The MAM will continue to partner with community agencies serving diverse populations and provide opportunities for their members to participate in medical education through the PPP program. Now that gaps in the VP demographic profile have been identified, targeted recruitment strategies and widespread advertising campaigns can begin.

References


Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the volunteer patients for their time, Sarah-Agnée Dugazo for her helpful literature review, Miss Bindos from the Mississauga Partners/Medical Education Office for her assistance and the Determinants of Health Community Office.