Reap the rewards of being a clinical preceptor

Student, physiotherapy clinical experiences enable students to practice and develop the essential clinical competencies (i.e., expert, communicator, collaborator, manager, advocate, scholarly practitioner, professional) required at entry and throughout their careers. Under the direction and support of registered physiotherapists within the clinical setting, each PT student has the opportunity to apply the knowledge they have acquired in the classroom. The individuals who supervise students during clinical experiences are referred to as clinical preceptors/clinical instructors. Together, academic faculty and clinical preceptors work in an important and effective collaborative partnership, to ensure students are able to provide safe, effective, evidence-informed and client-centered care upon graduation.

More than just Educators For many students, their clinical preceptors help to shape the direction and future of their professional careers. Clinical preceptors have the unique capacity to educate and inspire! Below are examples from physiotherapy students in university programs across Canada of behaviours and attitudes students respect in their clinical preceptors:

"...acted as a daily role model through his work ethic, his compassion for all of his patients, and understanding their individual needs. I hope to one day be as effective as my clinical preceptor as a physiotherapist, communicator and leader."

"...was an ideal clinical preceptor. She is knowledgeable, supportive, positive, and very dedicated to teaching. As the [clinical experience] progresses, she proves to not only be kind, but a resource for both theoretical knowledge and practical skills."

"...her passion for physiotherapy and attention to details were contagious and made me appreciate the wide array of skills required to be a great physiotherapist, and made me want to thrive to become one."

"...she transformed my attitude towards pulmonary rehabilitation and she has become my role model. I would like to be like her ten years down the road after I have graduated."

"...she developed my passion not only for private orthopedics, but for the physiotherapy profession as a whole."

"My clinical [preceptor] will forever be a mentor for me in my continued personal and professional growth. My preceptor is someone I look up to for her ability to balance life as a physiotherapist, mother/wife, and a practice lead. Her daily upbeat personality at work serves as an inspiration for me to find a setting and area of work within physiotherapy, which I will truly love."

Preceptor and Mentor A preceptor assumes responsibility for fostering and building the core professional skills of a physiotherapy student, typically in a more formal arrangement. A mentor functions as a role model, a teacher and a counselor with a focus on the professional development of the mentee. While distinct, the roles overlap, and are critical to fostering the development of a professional student. A number of provincial physiotherapy colleges recognize the value and importance of registrants mentoring physiotherapy students in order to contribute to the "preparation of students for future health care practice... Supervising students is one way in which physiotherapists can promote their ongoing continuing competence." In addition, the CPA's Clinical Specialty Program Candidate Handbook highlights mentoring as one of the key competencies of being a Clinical Specialist in physiotherapy: "The clinical specialist in physiotherapy engages in teaching and mentoring that synthesizes and integrates knowledge and experience to support the advancement of the profession and its value to society. Teaching and supervising students (as well as supervising students working under a provisional license) is specifically identified under the mentoring competency." 3

What does a clinical preceptor have to gain by mentoring a physiotherapy student? Students can stimulate, energize and provide current, evidence-based information to clinical preceptors and facilities. The preceptor reflections below highlight that clinical preceptors as well as students gain from the preceptorship experience.

"I am always reinvigorated about my own job when I see it through a student’s eyes over the six weeks of supervising a physiotherapy student. I do not expect anything beyond helping the student’s with their learning and fostering their clinical reasoning skills."

"Students stimulate and sharpen my brain as we challenge one another through researching new practices and refreshing the old in order to provide best practices for our patients. Our patients get excited and take pride in playing an active role in student’s education."

Employers also recognize the value of hosting physiotherapy students. For example, Beverly Cole (Manager of the Physiotherapy Department at St. Joseph’s in Hamilton, Ontario) notes, “the presence of physiotherapy students encourages therapists to stay up to date with the latest in evidence-based practice and fosters their links with the university. Placements give the students an opportunity to see what we offer as an employer and we can assess their potential as future employees.” As the employer identifies, current physiotherapy students will become our colleagues. Thus, having the opportunity to influence and shape practice through offering clinical placements also provides recruiting and retention opportunities. Whether the student is at a junior or senior level, employers are able to screen potential employees for attributes considered an asset in any health care setting. What better way to ‘interview’ a future employee than to see them in a practice environment for an extended period of time.

National clinical education guidelines Foundational to the evolution of clinical experiences was the creation of new, national clinical education guidelines in 2011. These guidelines outline the specific clinical education requirements
to graduate competent, entry-level physiotherapy students who are generalists. In order to graduate from a physiotherapy program in Canada, all physiotherapy students must complete a minimum of 1,025 supervised professional practice hours, carried out in a variety of quality clinical settings (i.e. acute care, rehabilitation, ambulatory care – private & public settings) and areas of practice (i.e. cardiovascular and respiratory, neurological and musculoskeletal). This ensures that physiotherapy students graduate as generalists, having the entry level competencies to work in a diverse range of settings and areas of physiotherapy practice, within the present Canadian health care environment.

Clinical placement models are changing
Our profession has traditionally depended on the apprenticeship model to provide students with the foundation on which they can develop into independent practitioners and build their career path. However, changes to the health care system have resulted in increased demands on the day-to-day practice of physiotherapists. Simultaneously, governments are encouraging increased enrollment of university physiotherapy programs to meet the anticipated rehabilitation demands generated by the aging baby boomers. Both these changes have a direct impact on the ability of universities to prepare entry level graduates to meet the entry-to-practice national clinical education guidelines outlined above.

In response, physiotherapy programs in Canada are working to identify innovative, sustainable and flexible models that ensure students receive the highest quality clinical opportunities in order to be well prepared to enter the profession. These models allow physiotherapists who work part-time, in non-traditional roles and/or across multiple sites to offer clinical education experiences. Some examples of placement models supported by physiotherapy programs are:

1. Two clinical sites – a student completes a placement at two different clinical sites (e.g. two days/week at one site, three days/week at another).
2. Two clinical preceptors supervising one physiotherapy student – typically to accommodate therapists who may work part-time or holidays.
3. Extended placement timeframe and flexibility in placement dates (e.g. the student works four days per week over seven weeks, instead of five days per week over six weeks).
4. Peer mentoring model – one clinical preceptor supervises two physiotherapy students, allowing students to learn from each other as well as their clinical preceptor. This website, www.preceptor.ca, contains a 30-minute module on Peer Mentoring.

Benefits of being a clinical preceptor

1. Access to free clinical preceptor workshops offered by the local university PT program. These can be credited for continuing professional development in some jurisdictions.
2. Clinical preceptorship activities can be included in a professional development portfolio.
3. Some provincial licensing bodies are moving to acknowledge clinical supervision with professional development credits.
4. Fostering ties with faculty members teaching content in the practitioner’s area of expertise as well as opportunities for faculty appointments or episodic teaching in the Physiotherapy program. This benefit serves the preceptor and ensures physiotherapy graduates are ready for practice with contemporary notions of physiotherapy.
5. Some PT programs provide clinical preceptors with access to library resources at the university and reduced rates for continuing professional development courses.

Consider setting this goal for your clinic/department: Every PT will supervise at least one physiotherapy student every year. Your local university physiotherapy program will be most appreciative.

If you have offered a clinical placement in the last year, the student and the profession cannot say thank you enough. If you have not, and you would like to learn more about opportunities to help, please feel free to contact any one of the physiotherapy programs in Canada (contact information can be found at http://www.physiotherapyeducation.ca/PhysiotherapyEducation.html).

For the complete list of references used in this article, please visit www.physiotherapy.ca/Practice-Resources/Publications/Physiotherapy-Practice