

## **Patient Companion Program: A Curriculum to Promote Patient Advocacy and Education in the Geriatric Population Abstract**

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**Purpose/Aim:** The Patient Companion Project was created to provide meaningful volunteer opportunities to undergraduate pre-health volunteers while benefiting patients living in a long-term care setting. This curriculum emphasizes education about pertinent geriatric topics, including elder abuse, health literacy, advanced care planning, palliative care, barriers to healthcare, patient advocacy, motivational interviewing, evidence-based medicine, isolation and its effects on the geriatric population, medical aid in dying, depression, PTSD, dementia, movement disorders, pain management, behavioral changes, Medicare/ Medicaid and HIPPA education, while providing companionship to long term care patients in the hopes of improving health outcomes.

**Background:** Volunteer and clinical experiences are important for admission of students to health professional programs yet combining these experiences can be difficult with busy class schedules and/or part-time employment. Additionally, geriatric patients often face challenges in health care with reduced access to resources, limited health care literacy, language barriers, and lack of social support. These patients are at increased risk of isolation, mood disorders and experience a large burden of illness and healthcare utilization. Pairing these groups offers an opportunity to benefit both the undergraduate volunteers as well as the paired geriatric patients.

**Methods:** We recruited the pre-health students from the University of Colorado at Denver and University of Colorado at Boulder by presenting at their institutions via their pre-med programs as utilizing pre-professional emails. We coordinated with the Colorado State Veteran's Home Recreational Coordinator to pair our pre-health

students with isolated veterans without severe cognitive disease for a period of 2 years. These undergraduate volunteers meet with their assigned veteran twice every month. As a group, we meet every month for 1-2 hours for one of our educational lectures, journal club, book discussion, and to touch base with the undergraduate volunteers about their experience. The undergraduate volunteers document all their visits on an after-visit survey in order to monitor their experience, as well as fill out surveys monitoring their confidence about the curriculum's learning objectives. We have also created quality of life surveys that can be implemented in the future of this project at the one year mark and after 2 years of being paired with their patient. We will also provide surveys to the current and prior pre-health volunteers at the end of their dedicated 2 years regarding what significance the Patient Companion Project had on their life and their consideration of the medical field as a career field.

Summary of Progress: Our preliminary survey results show improvement in confidence in knowledge based, value based, and skill-based learning objectives after 6 months of the established educational curriculum.

Our future goal for this curriculum is to create a simple, straightforward guideline that can be easily replicated by others. Once the COVID-19 pandemic wanes and the nursing home community is safe again, we will ask our volunteers to return to their in-person visits with the option to continue letter writing as well. We will set up shadowing opportunities for them in specialties of interest once facilities allow the return of pre-med students. Our monthly lectures will continue in the zoom format for both the guest lecturers' and our students' convenience, unless we are implementing a hands-on workshop, since that has greatly reduced scheduling conflicts. Our hope is that other

interested programs will be able to adopt our curriculum and implement it at their home programs.