

# Clinical educator tip sheet: Promoting a positive learning environment

## Occupational Therapy Clinical Education Program

### What are clinical educator tip sheets?

The contribution of clinical educators to a student's learning and development while on placement is fundamental to the success of the placement and the overall outcomes for the student. This series of tip sheets aim to equip clinical educators with knowledge, information, processes and tools on key topics related to placement organisation and student learning.

### Why is this topic relevant?

Effective clinical placements provide an environment that supports students to integrate theory into practice and are an influential in a student's journey to becoming a competent health professional. This Tip Sheet aims to provide clinical educators with a range of strategies to promote a positive and effective learning environment for students on clinical placement.

### How can a positive learning environment be created?

To be effective, clinical learning environments must provide learners with an opportunity to experience the reality of professional practice in their chosen profession in a safe and supportive environment. At a minimum this is achieved by providing learners with:

- Access to patients/clients;
- Interactions with clinical staff;
- A context in which the learner can critically evaluate practice and reflect;
- Opportunities for learners to observe skilled role models; and

- Opportunities to take responsibility, work independently (under supervision) and receive feedback.

Elements of a best practice clinical learning environment include (Best Practice Clinical Learning Environments Framework (Department of Health, Victoria 2013)).



Some of these elements are outside of the direct control of clinical educators. Providing a positive learning environment though, is an element that clinical educators can have direct influence over. Components that might make a learning environment positive from a clinical educator's perspective might not be the same from a learner's perspective.

The following list summarises ideas put forward by learners and educators about what makes a positive learning environment:

- **A welcoming environment** which might include; a thorough orientation/induction, inclusion in team-based activities such as lunches, morning teas, meetings, etc, made to feel valued (not a burden), facilities and amenities made available (e.g a diary, desk, locker, stationary, etc).
- **A culture of learning**, where education is valued in the workplace. This includes in-service programs, students and clinical

education as an agenda at meetings and in-service planning.

- **A safe environment** refers to emotional, cultural and professional safety, as well as physical safety. It is a non-judgemental, tolerant environment where learners feel it is safe to participate, ask questions, take chances and make mistakes.
- **Appropriate learning opportunities** are provided to effectively bring together learner, teacher and clients in the same space, taking into account where the learner is in their progression.
- **Clarity of objectives**, about expected knowledge and proficiency level as the placement progresses, including awareness of the SPEF-R assessment tool. Other staff/colleagues should also be aware about the student's role during the placement.
- **Clinical education staff**, who display appropriate interpersonal attributes, are suitably trained / supported for the task. Clinical Education Support Officers (CESO) can offer support before, during and after the student placement.
- **Well-prepared learners**, are those who undertake prior reading and make an effort to find out about their new clinical environment. This should continue throughout placement, with learners expected to spend time engaged in reflective learning and practice, research, preparation of portfolios and related activities.
- **Appropriate ratios of learners to patients/clients**, to ensure that clinical spaces are not overburdened with multiple groups of learners (not necessarily all from the same discipline) all attempting to work with the same group of patients/clients at the same time.
- **Structured learning programmes and assessment**, which recognise and document learning needs and provide timeframes for achieving learning objectives.

It is also important to be aware of potential issues / barriers to a positive learning environment. These may include:

- **Occupational stress** may induce anxiety, inhibit learning, impair performance and compromise health and wellbeing. Support students with stress management strategies and /or debriefing.
- **Workplace incivility and aggression** -inform students of any issues that may impact on work environment / morale.
- **Consideration of rural and remote issues** for students on placement.
- **Issues of diversity**, including culturally and linguistically diverse groups, the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and the impact of gender and disability.

## References

Department of Health, Victoria 2013, Best Practice Clinical Learning Environments, The Best Practice Clinical Learning Environment (BPCLE) Framework, accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2017

<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/education-and-training/building-a-quality-health-workforce/bpcle-framework>

Occupational Therapy Practice Education Collaborative - Queensland (2007) [Clinical Educator's Resource Kit](#) Preparation of the clinical education environment.

**Developed by:** The Occupational Therapy Clinical Education Program (OTCEP): Striving for continuous improvement in access to, and the quality of clinical education for pre entry students and new graduates within Health and Hospital Services across the state.

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