

Suggestions for Creating a Public Health Interest Group

Background

Under the umbrella of its social accountability initiative, the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada (AFMC) established a Task Group on Public Health in 2005. The overall objective is to enhance the teaching of public health by making the undergraduate curriculum more interesting through the development of educational and faculty resources for all students, regardless of whether they proceed to a career in public health or not. It is seen as vitally important to the health of the population of Canada that all graduating physicians recognize and incorporate the concepts of public and population health into their own practice.

Canadian medical students often report that public health lectures are boring and that the content is not integrated with the rest of the curriculum; hence public health is not seen as relevant to the practice of clinical medicine. In addition there is little opportunity to be exposed to public health in the field.

As a result, the Task Group recommended to the Deans of Medicine:

...that Faculties of Medicine promote the formation of student interest groups in public health and community medicine. Those focussed on public health may be interdisciplinary with faculties such as nursing, social work and nutrition.

To this end, AFMC, supported by the Public Health Agency of Canada, is providing start-up funding to establish a number of student interest groups in public health across the country. Applicants may wish to consider the suggestions in this document to establish and organize their interest group in public health.

A. Reason for having a Public Health Interest Group

The group can serve as a mechanism to accomplish the following goals:

1. provide students with information about the importance of incorporating the concepts of population and public health into all areas of practice;
2. expose students to professionals in the field of public health and to community activities that demonstrate these concepts;
3. provide an opportunity for students to learn, network, and develop leadership skills; and
4. provide an opportunity for students to explore community medicine as a career option.

B. Steps in creating a Public Health Interest Group

- Initially, identify other students with an interest in public health and in being part of a public health interest group. From these, form an executive to assist in determining the goals of the group (see examples above), in recruiting members, and to assist in planning activities and linking with faculty and external agencies. Formal bylaws and/or objectives (see below) may assist in keeping the group focussed.
- Recruit members through word-of-mouth and advertising to the student body at special events, such as orientation week and other events specific to your school. Second, third and fourth year students may be the initial organisers but the intent should be to recruit from the first year student body in order to maintain a continuum of membership in the executive and in the regular membership.
- Solicit from the membership examples of topics and activities that would interest them (see below).
- Identify faculty members who would be able to act as mentors to the group and as links with external agencies and invite their involvement.

C. Meetings and activities

- The meetings are largely a means to an end, rather than an end in themselves: use them to plan activities for the group; develop programs of community action, etc.
- Consider convenient times for students to meet. Remember scheduling of exams and other important student events. Meetings could be held early evenings, weekends, or during the lunch break as brown bag meetings. Meetings can be held in a variety of locations.
- Invite other health professional students to participate.
- Determine the focus of the first meeting e.g. discussing goals, considering ideas for activities, approaching faculty etc. Decide on who will chair the first meeting. Have an open forum and be open to ideas that may be different from those of the organizing group.
- Aim to have 1 or 2 meetings per month; the more interactive they are the more effective they will be. Advertise meetings by using as many venues for student communication as possible.

Meeting Topics

Topics may be presented by invited experts in the field of public health or by student(s) with interest/knowledge in the topic area.

- A session on what is Public Health and how it relates to clinical care of patients – may want to invite a panel of speakers including a family physician, an internist and a community medicine specialist
- Implementing the CANMEDS roles: putting public health advocacy into action
- The principles of screening as it relates to populations and to individual patients
- Infection control in hospitals
- Surveillance of infectious diseases and outbreak management
- Chronic disease management e.g. obesity, hypertension, cancer
- Environmental health issues e.g. air pollution and asthma rates
- Smoking cessation and other behaviour change interventions
- The health of underserved populations, such as First Nations, Inuit, Métis people and new immigrants, in relation to the determinants of health
- The impact of globalization on the health of the Canadian population
- Global health issues and ways that medical students (and physicians) can contribute
- The ways in which funding schemes for paying doctors supports or discourages participation in public health activities
- Legal and ethical aspects of involvements in public health activities
- Careers in public health and community medicine.

External visits

- Group visits to local public health units and other agencies
- Shadowing of individual public health specialists e.g. public health inspectors, Medical Officers of Health.

Advocacy activities

- Review of medical school curriculum for public health content
- Advocate for the inclusion of public health concepts into the rest of the curriculum by asking specific public health questions during small group work, locating suitable teaching materials and by getting involved in curriculum committees
- Encourage course chairs to increase students' exposure to the concepts of public and population health.

Tips for Success

- Develop a set of formal goals/objectives for your interest group (see example below). Ensure that the group's objectives are clear, specific, known to the group members, achievable and measurable, and realistic.
- Established bylaws are often necessary in order for a club to obtain funding from the university or medical school. They *are not necessary* for the initial funding being offered by AFMC, but are worth considering. Bylaws promote fairness in group proceedings, ensuring that all essential functions are assigned to group members and that no one has too much responsibility, and providing a framework for the group to follow in subsequent years.
- Designate one or two students from each class to promote the interest group, announce meetings, and provide feedback on potential topics to the interest group.
- Set up a planning committee to develop a program of meetings and activities.
- Meetings should be short and well organized.
- Food and refreshments are an incentive to attend. Have students sign up in advance (with their e-mail addresses) so that enough food and material is available.
- End each meeting with an announcement of the next meeting.
- Follow up each meeting with thank you notes to speakers and panel participants. They may be willing to participate again or help the group in some other way.
- Keep records of meeting topics, speakers, number of attendees, costs etc. This will be helpful in providing continuity for next year's officers. This information will also be useful when applying for further funding.
- Application to the Student Union to become a sanctioned club may assist in sustaining the group into the future.

Sample Bylaws for the Public Health Interest Group

I. The goals shall be to:

- provide students with information about the importance of, and practical ways for, incorporating the concepts of population and public health into their practice;
- expose students to people in the field of public health and to community activities that demonstrate these concepts;
- provide an opportunity for students to learn, network, and develop leadership skills; and
- provide an opportunity for students to explore community medicine as a career option.

II. Membership shall be open to all medical and other health professional students.

III. The Executive shall consist of President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer.

IV. Officers shall be elected each year, and shall be elected by majority vote of the members.

The *President* shall preside at all meetings and serve the needs of the organization as executive officer.

The *Vice President* shall perform the President's duties in his or her absence.

The *Secretary* shall record meeting information (topics covered, speakers, number of attendees etc), notify members of meetings.

The *Treasurer* shall keep a record of expenses, authorize expenditures, plan the yearly budget and provide financial reports as required.

Funding of the Public Health Interest Groups has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada.