

Joys of Precepting: Lessons Learned

Mary H.H. Ensom

A couple of years ago, a colleague asked me to give a talk to her pharmacy staff on the topic of how to motivate pharmacist preceptors, residents, and students and to share with them my “joys of precepting”.* On reflection, I realized that everything I do I have learned over the years by observing my reaction to how preceptors and teachers have treated, motivated, or encouraged me.

I have been strongly influenced by 4 individuals whom I would like to acknowledge here: Dr Paul Sears, my freshman chemistry professor at the University of Kentucky; Dr George Francisco, a preceptor for one of my Bachelor of Science in Pharmacy clinical clerkships and now Associate Dean at the University of Georgia College of Pharmacy; Dr John Cormier, a colleague at the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) Hospital and now Dean Emeritus at the MUSC College of Pharmacy; and Dr Bob Blouin, my clinical pharmacokinetics professor during PharmD school and my fellowship preceptor, now Dean at the University of North Carolina School of Pharmacy. I have also been influenced by several negative role models, but will focus only on the positive in this article.

Dr Sears taught me the importance of making each student feel special. By the end of the second week of the school year, he knew every one of the approximately 150 students in our class by name! Now, before each term, I study the class composite so that I can learn all the students’ names and put their names with their faces by the time they get to class. As well, I learned from Dr Sears the importance of prompt feedback: he returned marked exams the very next class day.

From Dr Francisco, I gained an appreciation for how students in class and on rotations learn from mistakes

without harming the patient. These situations are merely “training grounds” and the students’ opportunity to make mistakes. Dr Francisco encouraged me to be inquisitive by affirming that no question is a “dumb” question. Whenever I answered a question, he always said things like “good for you” and really meant it!

Dr Cormier taught me how to nurture a young pharmacist’s career development. At a time when I had no experience or credentials, he created opportunities for me to teach kidney transplant and dialysis patients about their medications, arranged for my very first continuing education presentation and sat through my dry-runs, and was instrumental in my entrée into the clinical arena to become a “decentralized” pharmacist in the days when most pharmacists were “trapped” in the pharmacy.

Dr Blouin taught me the value of having an open-door policy and giving individualized attention to students. Despite his busy schedule, he always made time for me and explained difficult concepts in a way that made them easy to understand.

These 4 people instilled in me the desire to emulate these qualities in each of my professional positions over the years.

I also have learned a great deal from feedback provided by my students and residents. From them, I’ve learned that most students and residents appreciate

- continual feedback on how they are doing, both positive and negative, but especially the positive
- a good balance between appropriate guidance and autonomy
- genuine interest in their learning, growth, and development
- “personalized” lectures and discussions, as well as descriptions of personal experiences and research findings
- opportunities to feel a sense of accomplishment when they go beyond the call of duty, e.g., by working on a special project, presenting a poster, or writing an article or manuscript.

Footnote:

*In this editorial, I have used the terms “preceptor” and “mentor” loosely, although by definition the former is usually considered temporary, related to a specific project or course.¹



Perhaps most of all, they appreciate time spent with a preceptor who genuinely loves what he or she is doing and teaching.

Some specific things I do to enhance each student's or resident's rotation experience include

- asking them to treat their rotation as the one (maybe the last) opportunity to learn as much about the topic area as possible
- asking them to demonstrate their initiative and motivation by somehow leaving their mark on the rotation
- reviewing rotation-specific goals and objectives with them at the beginning of the rotation
- having them write down their personal rotation goals and objectives (i.e., what experiences they desire from their rotation and what skills and competencies they want to gain from the rotation)
- posting their personal goals and objectives above my own desk and trying to strike a good balance between their personal objectives and the rotation ones
- reviewing both sets of objectives periodically, so that residents can see for themselves how far along they have come in mastering the subject area
- discouraging mere busy-work and encouraging them to get as much mileage out of all of their hard work as possible (e.g., by suggesting that they get involved in projects that might merit publication)
- treating each of them as a colleague — learning something from every person
- not being afraid to ask if (or admit that) “I don't know”

- freely sharing credit
- being willing to go the extra mile and do more than my share
- being willing to be the first one to put pen to paper
- when students or residents get discouraged, reminding them that “If it were easy, everyone else would be doing it!”

As pharmacist preceptors, we all have the opportunity to teach and mentor people entering our profession. To me, few activities are more rewarding than contributing to a pharmacy student's or resident's professional development and, years later, seeing the visible fruits of one's labour.

Reference

1. Kilcher A, Sketris I. *Mentoring resource book: a guide for faculty, researchers and decision makers*. Dalhousie (NS): Dalhousie University, College of Pharmacy; 2003.

Mary H.H. Ensom, PharmD, FASHP, FCCP, FCSHP, is Professor and Director, Doctor of Pharmacy Program, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Distinguished University Scholar, University of British Columbia, and Clinical Pharmacy Specialist, Children's & Women's Health Centre of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia. She is also an Associate Editor of *CJHP*.

Address correspondence to:

Dr Mary H.H. Ensom
Department of Pharmacy (0B7)
Children's & Women's Health Centre of British Columbia
4500 Oak St.
Vancouver BC
V6H 3N1

e-mail: ensom@interchange.ubc.ca

