

# TALKING OUT LOUD

## WA medical students' views on a sexual health elective

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### BACKGROUND

Medical students at the University of Western Australia (UWA) were offered a sexual health elective during the third year of their six year undergraduate medical course between 2007 and 2013. Ten to fifteen students per year were accepted. The elective was 3.5 hours weekly for 13 weeks. The teaching was a mix of 9-10 workshops, 2-3 clinic placements and 1-2 other agency visits. This qualitative study aimed to establish:

- Whether a sexual health elective can enable lasting gains in skills, knowledge and confidence.
- If these gains were made, what particular aspects of the elective enabled this to occur.

### METHODS

Ten former students were interviewed 2-6 years after completion of the elective. Interviewees were diverse in current work roles, cultural backgrounds and genders. Pseudonyms were used, and the transcripts analysed for themes.

### FINDINGS

Interviewees mostly considered that they were more confident and skilled in sexual health than peers who had not done the elective. The main processes in gaining confidence and skill are outlined on the right, utilizing illustrative quotes.

### CONCLUSIONS

The interviewees were clear that a number of strategies assisted them in the development of confidence & skills in sexual health. Important strategies included the creation of a safe space to allow students to express and examine their thinking and their feelings. Facilitating open discussions, enhancing awareness of a broad range of issues (including some challenges!), and many opportunities to practice appeared to be effective.

#### Developing openness

*'you had to take a stance along a line, and then justify your stance, and then you were allowed to change your opinion, and that was really good, because it meant that it taught us how to take into account other people's feedback and opinions, and be OK to then change your stance' Laura*

#### Developing awareness

*'there was one week on sexuality in people with disabilities and that was really interesting for me, 'cause it's not something that I had had reason to think about before.' Robert*

#### Challenging perceptions

*'It was more of a paradigm shift for me. Knowing that older people also have their own sexual needs, 'cause I guess I'm guilty of brushing them aside, and thinking, "oh, they're old, they don't really have anything to do with that any more." Irene*

#### Challenging thinking, shifting perspectives

*'it definitely changed my perspective on sex workers, not that I had a really negative perspective, but just really like, they're every day people, as well. It really, really changed the way I thought about that, which has helped me professionally, definitely.' Ewan*

#### Practicing

*'I guess having practiced, I'm just more comfortable going to a patient's room and as part of my history, always taking a sexual history, saying, 'OK, are you sexually active? With who?' etcetera' Robert*

#### Feeling confident

*'It built confidence, it made you more comfortable, it challenged you to see different people's perspectives, all of those applies to your skills as a doctor across the board.' Laura*

#### Becoming comfortable

*'I think it made me a bit more comfortable in the hospital, as well, people presenting to Emergency with things that could be sexual health related, it made me feel more comfortable to look into that side of things' Grace*

#### Professionalism

*'to be a thorough doctor, you need to address that area in certain presentations, so that those who did the unit would feel like they were doing the wrong thing by the patient, I think, if they didn't take a sexual history if it was necessary' Grace*