



Left: A mentorship group at its first meeting. PHOTO CREDIT: COLLEGE OF HEALTH DISCIPLINES Right: Health mentor Hilary Brown meets with students from his discussion group, Anita Rashidi (MD program) and Rosie Higgins (Occupational Therapy). PHOTO CREDIT: DON ERHARDT



## A NEW WINDOW ON PATIENTS' PERSONAL STRUGGLES

Patients are supposed to be the centre of attention for students preparing to work in one of the health professions. But somehow, in the rush to learn all there is to know about treating, curing and healing, students rarely get a chance to know patients in any meaningful way – the choices they have to make, the barriers they confront, the frustrations they encounter.

A new program spanning several UBC faculties is now injecting greater humanity into the learning process.

The Interprofessional Health Mentors Program has matched 90 students with 23 people grappling with chronic conditions, such as spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, arthritis, epilepsy, HIV/AIDS and mental health problems.

Four students are assigned to each mentor, making for intimate, full-participation discussions. Their meetings take place during a 16-month period – a virtual epoch in the frenzied, “if it’s Tuesday it must be anatomy” whirlwind of becoming nurses, occupational therapists, dentists, physicians and pharmacists.

“We want the students to develop relationships with the patients over time, in contrast to most of their one-off, transitory encounters,” says Associate Professor of Medicine **Angela Towle**, who is leading the project. “At the same time, they are also building relationships with students from other health fields, gaining insights that could help them collaborate as professionals.”

Towle, who promotes interprofessional education through the Division of Health Care Communication in UBC’s College of Health Disciplines, borrowed the idea from Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia and Dalhousie University, but reworked it to give students and mentors more control.

“We obviously set some objectives, but we didn’t want to constrain the learning,” Towle says. “We wanted to see what would happen.”

So students and mentors – all of whom have volunteered to participate – meet on their own, without an instructor, every couple of months. They are given themes to discuss, and students write about their insights in online journals that are read by Towle and an instructor from their particular program.

“Usually, we don’t have the opportunity to spend more than 30 minutes with a client,” said **Heather Lyons**, a first-year occupational therapy student, whose mentor has multiple sclerosis. “Here, we’re delving into the human aspect. Being able to learn so much about someone – their family, the barriers in their environment, how certain words carry different meanings for them – is allowing us to learn on a deeper level.”

Mentors were selected in part based on previous experience as educators or facilitators. **Hilary Brown**, who teaches laboratory science at Vancouver Community College, thought the program might help raise awareness about his condition – he lost use of his legs due to a motor vehicle accident 23 year ago – among a broader range of health professionals.

“When I’m in an office or examining room, there’s an uneasiness that doesn’t have to be there,” he says. “Maybe if I can get in at the ground level of the training of these health professionals, I can break down some of the barriers that I sense.”

One of Brown’s students, **Anita Rashidi**, sees those barriers coming down already.

“It’s an open environment, so you feel comfortable asking questions that might be awkward in the ‘real world’ of a doctor’s office, and that awkwardness could end up affecting how you treat your patients,” says Rashidi, a first-year medical student. “It’s good to clear up those uncertainties now, in a safe environment.”

The program, which receives financial support from the College of Health Disciplines and UBC’s Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund, will double in size with a second wave of students in September, and perhaps include even more health training programs.