

## Innovations in clinical education for physiotherapy students

Jull G,<sup>1</sup> Watson K,<sup>1</sup> Morris N,<sup>2</sup> Paull E,<sup>2</sup> Blackstock F,<sup>3</sup> Synnot A,<sup>3</sup> Rivett D,<sup>4</sup> Thomas L,<sup>4</sup> Wright A,<sup>5</sup> Moss P,<sup>5</sup> Hedlefs D,<sup>6</sup> Jones A,<sup>6</sup> McMeeken J,<sup>7</sup> Remedios L,<sup>7</sup> Haines T,<sup>8</sup> O'Connor V,<sup>1</sup> Peterson R.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The University of Queensland

<sup>2</sup> Griffith University

<sup>3</sup> LaTrobe University

<sup>4</sup> The University of Newcastle

<sup>5</sup> Curtin University of Technology

<sup>6</sup> James Cook University

<sup>7</sup> The University of Melbourne

<sup>8</sup> Monash University

The number of Australian universities offering physiotherapy programs is challenging public and private health systems' capacity to provide sufficient clinical placements and suitable varieties of 'clinical material'. The use of simulated patients (SPs) is an alternative which has advantages but it is unknown if reduced time with 'real patients' within a clinical placement affects students' attainment of clinical competencies. This multicentre study investigated two SP models (i) a training week with SPs before clinical immersion, (ii) two training weeks of a SP/real patient mix within a clinical placement in the musculoskeletal and cardiorespiratory fields. It was hypothesised that no significant differences in clinical competency would be observed between students trained within the new SP models and those trained in traditional clinical immersion on completion of the clinical placement. Four single blind randomised controlled trials were conducted. Volunteer physiotherapy students entering clinical education in musculoskeletal or cardiorespiratory were recruited from the seven participating universities from 2009-10. Sample size required 90 students per group in each trial (total 720). Within each trial, students were stratified on academic score and randomised into the SP or traditional training group. Students' competence in management of both a new and follow-up patient was assessed at the end of the clinical placement by an independent examiner using a standard tool. The trials will be completed in December 2010. An interim descriptive analysis suggests no between-model differences in students' clinical competency scores, suggesting that the use of SPs can be successfully integrated into clinical education and enhance capacity.

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