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Role-emerging placements (REPs) – An evolving alternative for student pharmacist experiential education

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To the Editor: With growing student cohort sizes and workplace pressures, sustainability of arranging experiential placements in pharmacy professional settings and ensuring quality of experiences has become increasingly difficult for placement coordinators. It is no wonder that there are demands for some pharmacy schools to search for alternatives to traditionally established experiential placement opportunities for students. Role-emerging placements (REPs) are evolving as such an alternative. REPs in pharmacy education are defined as placements where the student is exposed to practice experiences in environments where a pharmacist would not routinely be involved in day-to-day activities, or environments not traditional to the current scope of practice for pharmacists. Examples may include youth centers, mother and toddler groups, meetings of senior citizens, veterinary clinics, drug misuse facilities, mental health support groups.¹ Even though role-emerging placements (REPs) have long been a part of education in other healthcare degrees,^{2,3} they are a fairly new concept in pharmacy education, starting to gain traction by a few pharmacy schools worldwide as an alternative to traditional experiential placement settings.¹ These types of placements were first recognized in the literature in 2013.⁴ A preceptor perception study by Kassam et al. indicated the value and support for REPs of 4-week duration, as they have the potential to enhance interprofessional collaboration.⁴ Students who completed that REP also reported positive experiences and professional development.⁵ Student perceptions of other types of REPs are limited; with only a further two studies to date addressing student perceptions of much shorter placement experiences.^{6,7} While these studies reveal very positive attitudes of students toward their REP, each study relates to a different type of REP and duration, thus, student perceptions may not be consistently positive. Given the lack of research into REP benefits or challenges, further research into this area would be beneficial to establish the value, or lack of, for these types of experiential placements and to establish whether they are what they are all cracked up to be. As experiential placements are embedded into curriculums to primarily bridge the theory-practice gap and to assist students to develop practice-ready skills,⁸ Can we be assured that these placements are as valuable as traditional ones, especially if they are not directly supervised by a pharmacist preceptor on site? Furthermore, there are many unanswered questions relating to REPs such as: Do they provide the opportunity for students to contextualize theoretical knowledge or develop the required skills and competency standards for future pharmacists or are they just another environment for students to fill their time on placement? Are there disadvantages to having these types of experiential placement opportunities compared to the more traditional established placements? What are students' perceptions about attending these types of placements compared with traditional ones? Does duration of these placements impact on the perceived value; and what is the best way to support students to make the most of their experiences and use them to develop professionally? Future research addressing these issues would be valuable. We can understand the need for seeking and introducing alternative placements, as experiential placement coordinators know firsthand how difficult it is to place all students in a variety of settings across an entire degree and ensure a meaningful experience. It is

important to make the distinction between “additional” experience in the form of REPs versus replacing traditional experience with REPs. Some experiential placement coordinators may have reservations about placing students in some types of REPs at the expense of not being placed in more traditional placement settings. A veterinary surgery or clinic could be considered as one example of an REP. A placement in a veterinary surgery or clinic as a student pharmacist may be interesting to view and observe perhaps for a day; however, if this is a placement that extends for a week or more, there are limitations. For example, will such placements address the competency standards required for a future pharmacist? Also, student expectations on the intended learning outcomes need to be set: In such an REP, the intention is not so much for the student to learn about medications affecting animals or how they should be delivered. Valuable learning can be drawn by observing a healthcare professional problem-solving, exhibiting leadership and empathy in a non-pharmacy related environment. Such transferrable skills are crucial to developing future pharmacists that place patient care at the core of their practice. Students need to be able to build on their reflective skills as well in order to make those associations, and benefit from the placement.^{9–11} Hence, it comes back to why these REPs are sought and how they can be valuable. Reservations to place students in REPs by experiential placement coordinators are understandable as there is not enough research into the outcomes for students. However, this should not discourage the utilization of these placements. Supporting students to make sense of REPs with carefully designed learning outcomes, can be a powerful complement to traditional experiential placements and enable them to develop different skills. Whatever one's views are in having pharmacy students placed in REPs, one thing for sure is that they will expose students to different environments and allow students to “get out of their comfort zone.” Students who can adapt to a change in environment, and work with different teams or health professionals, surely will have the edge for future work opportunities. That alone, suggests that there is potential to having REPs complement the more traditional ones for future pharmacy experiential placement programs.

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