

Title: Social accountability in community nursing: empowering students to make an impact

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What problem was addressed: In the Training Schools for Health Personnel, Limbe, Cameroon, students are sent to local communities to carry out a community assessment, needs diagnosis, and propose solutions to problems identified. Over the years students have diagnosed the same problems from the same communities. In the Mudeka community where the project was implemented, students have reported over the years the prevalence of water-borne infections, poor human waste disposal, and unavailability of clean portable water amongst others. Hence, a need to make students feel some responsibility in solving these problems identified not just doing this exercise as a school requirement.

What was tried: This project was introduced to faculty in a three-day interactive workshop in which the concepts of social accountability in health professions education and its relationship to this community placement were emphasised.

Interactive workshops were held with 55 students from the third year class and 51 students from the second year class for a period of two weeks. In these workshops students were introduced to concepts of social accountability, and their role in improving the health and quality of life of the community was emphasised. They were taught simple methods of home water treatment and storage and methods of cleaning, disinfecting, and caring for latrines and the environment around water sources, and communication skills were revisited. Nine third year and 10 second year students were selected to take part in the study.

These students went into the community visiting families and teaching them simple methods of household water treatment like boiling and using sodium hypochlorite (household bleach), etc. They also taught these families how to take care of their toilets by cleaning and disinfecting them daily using household bleach, keeping latrines covered with simple affordable materials like plywood, etc. They helped in cleaning surrounding areas of water sources, markets, etc. They educated families without toilets about the advantages of having toilets and the disadvantages of not having toilets and of using bushes or nearby streams for human waste disposal. This exercise was very participative as students used pictures, posters, and demonstrations which enhanced understanding. In all, the students visited 13 families during their stay in this community. Students expressed satisfaction with the project; one student said, *“I was so impressed when I noticed that just a day after our visit one family was already cleaning, covering its well, and boiling drinking water”*

What lessons were learned: Just by performing these activities, the students won the attention of the community dwellers. This was evident as four out of the 13 families visited were boiling their drinking water.

Students developed confidence in themselves as they realised they could play a role in solving some of the community's problems.

Changing behaviours and attitudes of people who have been used to a lifestyle is not an easy task; it requires time and efforts.