

EFFECTIVE PRECEPTOR SERIES

Introduction to Preceptorship & Preceptors

WHAT IS PRECEPTORSHIP?

The word “preceptor” means teacher or instructor. In the medical profession, preceptorship, then, is defined as a time of practical, real-world training for a medical student or resident, who is supervised by a preceptor – the teaching physician.

Tell Me More!

Students and residents in preceptorships usually work in smaller, community-based medical offices or hospitals. Other differences from tertiary care hospital settings include the level of one-on-one involvement between medical provider and student, responsibilities and independence of the student, extent of practical skills obtained and benefits to the medical provider.

ROOTS OF PRECEPTORSHIP: COMMUNITY-BASED TEACHING

What Is Community-Based Teaching?

Community-based teaching is the teaching of a resident or student by a medical provider, or preceptor, in an office or hospital environment. Preceptorships are successful because they are founded in community-based teaching, the roots of medical education.

This simple concept greatly impacts the learner’s experience and benefits the medical provider, as well. The one teacher/one learner/one patient relationship creates educational cognizance, where the learner experiences and learns from:

- Role modeling
- Effective assessment
- Immediate feedback
- Meaningful evaluation

Why Is Community-Based Teaching Important?

Through community-based teaching, role modeling that cannot be replicated in other, larger medical settings benefits the learner and maximizes his learning experience. An office setting provides

excellent educational opportunities with one-on-one teaching. Because of these and other benefits, community-based teaching is quickly becoming the choice method for resident education.

Community-based preceptorships uniquely allow the student to learn about:

- The clinical practice of medicine by working with a preceptor and patients
- Clinical illness in concert with classroom learning of organ systems
- How illness may be impacted by social, behavioral, and systems-based issues

How Good Is Community-Based Teaching?

Learners in a community-based teaching environment gain educational experiences that are more reflective of real-world medicine than can be afforded from the university-based educational setting. Compared with university-based clinics, students participating in community learning see more patients, manage a greater variety of patient complaints, practice more triage care and perform a greater number of procedures.

Who Are Preceptors?

Most often, preceptors are medical providers who are teaching physicians without full-time academic appointments, but preceptors can also be full-time academic physicians. A key characteristic of preceptors is that they deliver care in non-tertiary care settings.

What Can A Physician Provide A Learner?

Medical providers who are preceptors in a community-based teaching environment offer precisely what learners want: practical skills. Usually in less than a five-minute teaching moment, learners focus on the patient

and his/her problem rather than discuss an abstract topic and get to participate in developing a practical conclusion to the problem. Students also appreciate the level of independence in delivering care. Of most value, perhaps, is the benefit students derive from watching the preceptor manage a medical problem, positively affecting the student’s own communication and clinical skills, and only the preceptor-learner relationship can produce such learning opportunities.

HOW DOES THE PRECEPTOR BENEFIT?

Most often, the benefits to the preceptor cannot be recorded or deposited. Preceptors continually state that precepting brings back the joy of clinical practice, and many say they feel as though they are giving back to the profession. Preceptors feel less isolated and enjoy the reward of sharing their knowledge. Not only does the learner improve clinical skills, but preceptors also report that they, too, benefit from reviewing the basics and seeking new knowledge. Preceptors can also benefit their practices by recruiting medical professionals with whom they have worked day-to-day.

What Do Learners Expect From Their Preceptorship?

Students are clear about what they want from their learning experience: the chance to manage patients’ cases, experience in collecting basic data and improvement in their interpretation skills with the different cases they experience in an office environment. Learners want their preceptors to encourage independence in their students. Other characteristics that learners value in their preceptors include the preceptor’s desire to solve problems, to be an enthusiastic physician and to engage in the learning process.

What Are The Costs To The Preceptor?

While the physician's time and lost billings are most often cited as costs of precepting, many physicians note that productivity and revenue are not at all affected. The physician can probably expect about a one-hour workday increase for each half-day spent in teaching. One study stated that well over one-half of the physicians participating experienced no reduction in income. Another survey reported that physicians might see one fewer patient for each half-day spent teaching.

How Are Patients Impacted?

Aside from questions of lost income, many physicians are concerned that quality of care and patient satisfaction will drop, resulting from having students present in their medical practices. The opposite seems to be true. In a study of HMO practices, 90% of the physicians reported that quality of care and satisfaction were not affected. Studies of private practices yield similar results.

Many patients say they enjoy the extra attention from learners, even when the learner repeats part of the examination.

THE EFFECTIVE PRECEPTOR

A literature review indicates the effective preceptor demonstrates:

Communication Skills

- Possesses and demonstrates broad knowledge
- Explains the basis for actions and decisions
- Answers learner questions clearly and precisely
- Open to conflicting ideas and opinions
- Connects information to broader concepts
- Captures learners attention
- Makes learning fun

Careful Analysis Of The Learner

- Accurately assesses learner's knowledge, attitudes and skills
- Uses direct observation of the learner
- Provides effective feedback
- Performs fair and thoughtful evaluations

Skill In Practice And Teaching

- Provides effective role modeling
- Demonstrates skillful interactions with patients
- Presents information with organization and clarity
- Generates interest in the subject matter
- Organizes and controls the learning experience
- Balances clinical and teaching responsibilities
- Give appropriate responsibility to the learner

Motivation Of The Leader

- Emphasizes problem solving
- Translates specific cases into general principles
- Promotes active involvement of the learner
- Demonstrates enjoyment and enthusiasm for patient care and teaching
- Develops a supportive relationship with the learner

Source: MAHEC, Mountain Area Health Education Center, Asheville, NC, and Alguire P. et al. Teaching in your office. Philadelphia: American College of Physicians, 2001.



Author of 2013 Update: Amie J. Cullimore, MD, MSc, BEd, McMaster University, Canada
Original Author: James J. Neutens, PhD, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The Effective Preceptor Series is a project of the Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics (APGO) Undergraduate Medical Education Committee (UMEC):

Nancy A. Hueppchen, MD, MSc, Chair
Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Jodi F. Abbott, MD
Boston University School of Medicine

Samantha D. Buery-Joyner, MD
Virginia Commonwealth University

Alice W. Chuang, MD
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Amie J. Cullimore, MD, MSc, BEd
McMaster University

John L. Dalrymple, MD
University of Texas, Houston

Lorraine Dugoff, MD
University of Pennsylvania

David A. Forstein, DO
Greenville Hospital System

B. Star Hampton, MD
Women & Infants Hospital/Brown University

Joseph M. Kaczmarczyk, DO, MPH
Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

Sarah M. Page-Ramsey, MD
San Antonio Uniformed Services Health Education Consortium

Archana A. Pradhan, MD, MPH
UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School

Abigail Wolf, MD
Thomas Jefferson University

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This publication is part of the APGO Effective Preceptor Series – a group of pamphlets intended to educate practitioners and learners about the apprentice system or preceptorship. The quality of learning that occurs in an established relationship between the teacher and the student often meets the challenge of educating physicians in today's chaotic health care environment. It allows doctors in training to practice as much like doctors as good medical practice will allow, and it provides a setting in which some of the best medical education in our nation takes place.

To learn more about APGO and The Preceptorship Series publications, contact:
Association of Professors of Gynecology and Obstetrics (APGO) • 2130 Priest Bridge Drive, Suite #7 • Crofton, MD 21114
Phone (410) 451-9560 • Fax (410) 451-9568 • www.apgo.org