A home for interprofessional medical education at Dalhousie

Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, is constructing a building where students from different health disciplines will learn together, inside and outside of the classroom, to better prepare them for working as part of health care teams.

“Traditionally, the education of students in these programs has been siloed,” says William Webster, dean of the Faculty of Health Professions at the university. “This is a real problem. In evolving health care delivery, there is an emphasis on team delivery.”

The five-storey, $35-million building is in keeping with a shift in the curricula at the university’s Centre for Collaborative Health Education, which has been evolving to better prepare students for the team-based professional environments in which they will eventually work.

Currently, the health disciplines learn in buildings scattered across campus or in leased space throughout Halifax, making certain types of interprofessional education difficult.

The new building will allow faculty to teach future health professionals, including students of medicine, nursing, physiotherapy and social work, in the same location. The students will still learn most things separately, but when curriculum overlaps, educators can arrange lectures, interprofessional projects or case studies to help students learn about other professions’ perspectives and approaches.

The building will also contain a simulation lab, where students from different disciplines can practise using each other’s skillsets and competencies to provide patients with the best possible care.

Having students from different disciplines learn together will also encourage social mingling outside of projects and simulations, says Webster — an important opportunity to build relationships and appreciate the role of each person on a health care team.

“It’s really about helping students understand very early on what each profession does,” says Webster. “We’re trying to instill the concept of patient and family-centred care.”

Dalhousie already has a health mentors program, established in 2010, that places students in interprofessional groups of four. Each group spends time with a
volunteer mentor in the community who has a chronic health condition or disability. The students learn how these conditions affect their mentors’ daily lives as well as what it’s like to navigate the health care system.

As students spend time with their mentors, they work on patient-centred care approaches, effective interviewing and active listening. The students also gain a better understanding of their fellow group members’ roles and responsibilities.

Dalhousie’s curriculum is becoming increasingly interprofessional, says Alison McIntyre, a former occupational therapist who is now a second-year medical student. She represents the Dalhousie Medical Student Society at curriculum meetings and sees the building as an important step in this transition.

“I think it’s great,” she says. “Interdisciplinary, collaborative teams are the way of the future.”

Students from different disciplines also currently work together on group projects when their respective curricula overlap. For example, students studying occupational therapy work with students studying social work to make a poster that addresses an issue in their community, such as family violence or accessibility.

The Nova Scotia government has pledged $10 million over the next 15 years to support the building’s construction and ongoing operating costs. Site preparation begins this month, and the building will welcome its first students in September 2015.

“Interprofessional education really fits in with the government’s policy on how they want health care delivery to operate,” says Webster. — Catherine Cross, CMAJ