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Training for primary health care

New courses in health services studies have been launched at Helsinki University. They offer undergraduates a chance to study this subject to degree and doctoral standards without previous medical training of any kind.

The University of Helsinki is the oldest and biggest university in Finland and is often regarded as the most conservative. In spite of that, it does lead the way in many fields.

The Primary Health Care Act came into effect in 1972, specifying the new emphasis on primary health care in Finnish health policy, but it took the University of Helsinki about nine years to react. Meanwhile the new universities in Kuopio and Tampere, which were established in 1972, enthusiastically developed their teaching programmes in primary health care.

In 1981, the University of Helsinki established the first Finnish professorship in general practice, the field of teaching being specified as the functions of the health centres. In the Finnish system the health centres are the foundation of primary health care. In 1982, the new department of general practice and primary health care was established in Helsinki, the first of its kind in the country. The responsibilities of the department covered general practice teaching for undergraduates and continuing education for general practitioners. This programme was organized during 1982-83.

At the same time the planning of another new teaching programme was started in the medical faculty, i.e., the degree programme for health services studies.

From the beginning, as chairman of the department of general practice I was closely involved in the planning of these programmes, and my experience at the University of Edinburgh and Johns Hopkins University proved useful in creating a unique teaching programme in the country.

Degree programmes in health services studies had already been started in the two new universities, Kuopio and Tampere, where the approach was through nursing studies. All entrants to those programmes were required to possess an advanced nursing degree.

In Helsinki, an integrated, multidisciplinary approach was used, giving newly matriculated high-school graduates the possibility of applying for these programmes. In Finland, universities do not have postgraduate degrees such as Master of Public Health. To get a master’s degree in, say, political science or philosophy, a

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minimum of four years’ full-time university study is required. The same applies to the new degree of Master of Health Care.

This article describes the interesting and encouraging programme that resulted from

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the combination of the general practice and health services studies programmes.

General practice

Modern general practice nowadays forms the most essential medical discipline from the primary health care point of view. It is especially interested in the early detection of diseases and in health promotion. Very closely tied to the academic discipline of general practice in Helsinki are the subjects of primary health care organization and the management of primary health care services, because these are important elements in the functioning of health centres. As an academic discipline, general practice emphasizes team work, communication skills, and the community-based comprehensive approach to health problems.

The Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care is now involved in undergraduate teaching for one semester during the last clinical course. The teaching comprises lectures, seminars, and a five-week period of practical teaching in the health centre, where the students work in pairs under the guidance of the teachers, who are full-time health centre doctors trained for the teaching task by the department.

At the end of the semester there is a final written examination, which, together with the assessment of the practical training, forms the final grade in general practice. Thus, the medical curriculum at Helsinki University is basically very traditional.

Health services study programmes

The health care programmes at Helsinki University comprise health services studies leading to a master’s degree in health care, and a postgraduate course in health care leading to a doctorate. Two kinds of courses are provided that both lead to the master’s degree—the health care programme itself and a health care teacher training programme. The latter has five separate study lines, each with its own main subject: nursing, physiotherapy, X-ray technology, laboratory work, and occupational therapy.

The health care programme comprises two study lines—nursing and management. In the nursing line about a quarter of the students are university undergraduates without any previous degrees. In the management line, half the students have no previous degrees and the other half consists of nurses, laboratory technicians, medical doctors, dentists, physiotherapists, psychologists, and lawyers. The management line prepares students for general health services administration and management positions and is not tied to nursing education as is sometimes erroneously believed. Preparation for the position of nursing director is given in the nursing study line, which also produces experts for various positions in the planning of nursing services as well as for practical nursing positions in various organizations.

At present the number of students in the health care programmes is about 280. The intake of students to these programmes is
through entrance examinations. Every year about 60 new students are accepted, 20 for the nursing line, 15 for the management line, and 20 for the teacher training programme. (In addition, 5–10 Swedish-speaking students are accepted every year.)

**Collaboration with the community**

An important aspect in the development of the department was its integration with the Helsinki health centre. It should be pointed out that in Finland a health centre is a functional organization, not a building. In spring 1986 an agreement was signed between the University of Helsinki and the City of Helsinki linking the department closely with the functioning of a real-world health care organization. The full-time university medical teaching staff were given part-time positions at the health station, and the chairman of the department received a part-time senior position in the office of research and development of the city health department. The agreement also provided for a teaching and research health station and the future premises of the department. One of the provisions was that the practical training of medical and health care students would be carried out in the city health services. These arrangements are unique in Finland.

There is now close collaboration in research and development activities between the department and the city health department, and this collaboration will soon be extended to the education of the primary health care personnel of the city health centre, which will take the form of continuing education for various groups of personnel.

**Continuing education**

The department organizes continuing education for general practitioners and other health personnel working in primary health care. This is done on a national basis. Every year 15–17 one-week continuing education courses are being offered. Many are organized in collaboration with other departments and clinics of the medical school. Lately there has been a trend towards integrated courses for several groups of personnel simultaneously. They have covered such subjects as quality assurance in primary health care and research in primary health care. The results have been encouraging, and the number of integrated courses will be increased. These courses have been offered also directly to health centres during the last two years. During the past three years a one-week teacher training course has been organized for general practitioners.

When postgraduate medical education was made a university responsibility in Finland in 1988, the department became responsible for vocational training in general practice in the University of Helsinki. This will be the most extensive postgraduate training programme in the medical school, including 110 training posts in various health centres and hospitals when fully developed by 1991. It is an ideal situation for the training of doctors in primary health care, since now the same department has responsibility for undergraduate, vocational and continuing education of primary health care doctors.

**Multidisciplinary and multifaculty teaching**

There is a high degree of integration of students from various backgrounds and with different educational objectives within the teaching programmes. In teaching there is close collaboration between the medical faculty, the faculty of political science, and the faculty of education. Integration with medical students is achieved through the
requirements of 30 weeks of medical studies out of the total of 160 in the programme — 10 weeks of biomedicine, 10 weeks of clinical medicine, and 10 weeks of public health science. Thus the health care students become familiar with the medical students and vice versa. There is a similar sharing of studies with students in the other faculties mentioned. Moreover, there are common courses for all health care students regardless of the line of study, which again brings together students with different backgrounds and study objectives. The best sharing of learning and values, however, takes place throughout the entire study period owing to the great variation in student experience and background. Since primary health care is based on teamwork, this is regarded as a great benefit. The director of the health services studies programmes is the professor of general practice and primary health care, who is directly responsible for the health services management course. The staff of the department is multidisciplinary.

**Evaluative research**

The department represents a new direction in both health care education and medical education in the country. The only problem is connected with teaching resources. In research the department’s focus is on health services and especially evaluative research. Special emphasis has been placed on research and development activities in collaboration with health centres in various parts of the country. In this way the department directly benefits the development of primary health care services. Many interesting primary health care research projects are now under way in the department, on the efficiency of primary health care, the use and effect of the physiotherapy services, the optimization of home care services, the efficiency of appointments systems, and the quality of care in health centres. The department has just completed a project on methods used in continuing education. About 20 master’s degree theses are in preparation, the majority of which are directly connected with primary health care. The first students graduated in October and November 1987, and during the spring of 1988 the first doctoral students in health care began their studies.

In all master’s degree programmes there is a strong emphasis on the applicability of the acquired knowledge to primary health care activities. The programmes emphasize the importance of communication and collaboration between the various groups of health personnel in primary health care as well as the need for research to develop the primary health care services.