

‘Riang Ria Rabu’ as a community engagement and empowerment programme in the hospital setting

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Abstract

Riang Ria Rabu (RRR) is a unique programme for children in the hospital, pioneered by the Department of Paediatrics, School of Medical Sciences Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). It is a weekly programme designed to provide a platform for and promote voluntarism spirit among the organisational staff, students and general public to contribute back to the community, particularly children being hospitalised for treatment. Aiming to entertain paediatrics patients during their hospitalisation, RRR engages volunteers to organise different playful and fun activities for the children. It serves as a tool for children to enjoy ‘play time’ during the admission in the hospital notwithstanding their disease prognostication. For volunteers, RRR provides opportunity for experiential learning through interaction with children at different ages with different socioeconomic background and problems. Sustainability of the programme is achieved by integrating RRR into undergraduate medical students’ curriculum. RRR has enormous potential benefit for both the children and volunteers involved by improving socio-emotional well-being of the former and nurturing volunteerism and humanistic spirit on the latter.

Keywords: *community engagement, volunteerism, play, children, Malaysia*

Introduction

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) is a renowned higher educational institution that has its own culture to cultivate. The culture must be based on effective group cooperation to produce high service quality and optimum productivity. The translation of achievement has to include serving the community through various models including community engagement model. Within its organisation, service delivery to the community can be achieved by engaging participation from the staff, students and general public from outside USM. This community empowerment in healthcare settings is seen as creating opportunity for volunteers to contribute within the organisational vicinity.

Being ill and having to stay away from home to receive treatment in a hospital is a stressful condition for many, especially paediatrics patients as well as their caregivers (Othman *et al.*, 2011). Whilst many children often stay in the hospital for a brief period, some cases such as oncological and surgical conditions require the children to stay longer for treatment and

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rehabilitation. Prolonged hospitalisation limits the children in many ways, such as schooling and engaging in fun activities with friends at home. In addition to the need to comply with unpleasant treatment, the children also suffer from boredom due to inflexible medical regime and fixed routines in the hospital. Often both caregivers and medical health practitioners are aware of this need, that the children desire play and entertainment. However, time limitations, lack of experience, feasibility and opportunities may hinder them from responding to that important need of the children. Some caregivers feel that they lose their personal life in caring the children. Caring for chronically ill children has sometimes led to burden and stressful life to many of the family members.

Responding to the above need, 'Riang Ria Rabu' (RRR) or Fun Wednesday is introduced as a community programme for children in the hospital. It aimed to entertain warded paediatric patients mainly through play and fun activities. The idea was initiated by the head of Paediatrics' Department - Professor Hans Van Rostenberghe in 2010 with an aim to encourage members of department to participate in community programmes. Initially, the programme was plainly known as 'Storytelling' whereby volunteer lecturers from the department shared stories and riddles with the children. Over the years, this storytelling session has evolved into a more comprehensive and structured programme, under the co-ordination of two lecturers at the department, Associate Professor Dr. Azizah Othman, a clinical psychologist and Dr. Surini Yusoff, a geneticist. It is now known as 'Riang Ria Rabu' as it becomes the most awaited activities by the hospitalised children every Wednesday.

Since the last five years, many creative activities and play have been organised for the children, by different groups of volunteers from inside and outside the hospital. Primarily, the RRR has served as a method of distraction for hospitalised children through participation in the planned activities. This programme has allowed the children to have time off from treatment and opened up opportunity for them to interact and socialise with each other. In addition, the RRR have also brought togetherness and co-operation among the students and volunteers to ensure the success of the programme. Moreover, the caregivers also benefited from RRR. Some of them who choose to join the activities have reported to enjoy the sessions as much as their children. Whereas, those who choose to leave the children playing with the volunteers find themselves enjoying the time-off from looking after the children 24/7.

The RRR community project has been running as part of the Paediatric Department, Hospital USM community since 2010. It is hoped that it will change the view of how we see community engagement work. Active participation of undergraduate medical students has provided a sustainable manpower, idea and creativeness through play with children. Play is an important element that assists in growth and development for children. It helps to assist in children's progress, interaction and learning through variety of fun and creative activities.

Methodology

The RRR's play activities are organised on a voluntary basis. This is initially engineered by the RRR coordinators through weekly students' involvement. As part of undergraduate participation and apprenticeship learning (Taib *et al.*, 2013), these students have to take part once in their 6 weeks paediatric clinical rotation. The students are given a 2-hour lecture on the psychological effects of hospitalisation on children, as well as ways to cope effectively, by a psychologist, who is one of the RRR co-ordinator. The students involved are required to initiate the agreed activities following a discussion with the RRR co-ordinators. In addition to students' participation, RRR has also been undertaken regularly by other university staff, especially the staff from library who have introduced bibliotherapy (Engku Chik *et al.*, 2014) and other methodology to entertain the children and relief their stress while in the hospital.

When a RRR programme is planned for a particular week, the nurses identified as RRR representatives at paediatrics wards were notified by the volunteers. The nurses would help to identify children who are fit to attend the session. Some children who are bed bound, immobilised or ill may not be able to take an active part. This community placement activities have empowered the students to conduct regular sessions with children. All RRR activities are held in the resource centre (*Pusat Sumber*) which is located at one level higher from the paediatrics wards in the hospital building. Students are required to learn how to be creative when conducting the task or game with the children. The RRR activities required minimal funding. Each student group is allocated with minimal petty cash to buy necessary preparation and gifts prior to running the activities.

The RRR activities include storytelling, traditional Japanese art of paper (origami), riddles, 'helang' and 'anak ayam' game, chicken dance, finger puppet show, colouring, video showing, fishing toys and 'putting fancy ball in a basket' and creative artwork. The learning objectives are to allow students participation and children's time out from treatment. Recently, a 'Toys on Trolley' project whereby toys are brought to the wards for children to borrow is introduced by the same volunteer team from the department. These children are allowed to borrow toys during their stay in the hospital. Integration and introduction of play therapy session has been made and these are significantly contributed by the paediatric palliative care team.

Although the service is run on a smaller scale by volunteered allied healthcare professionals, novice play therapists are being trained to provide regular voluntary service.

Sustainability

Participation of medical students has given an impetus to provide a continuous manpower to run the programme all year and to train students for volunteerism.

- (a) The students know how to interact with children with chronic illnesses. It has fostered humanistic values like caring and love. This gives hope to patients as well that there are outsiders who care for them.
- (b) The students get opportunity to be directly involved with the children through play to provide distraction and allow interaction which is important for resolution of psychosocial challenges. It is also hoped that the activity can assist patients in social integration and emotional modulation for a better outcome.
- (c) The students are able to learn to collaborate and establish networking with interested party internally (inside the hospital organisation) and externally (outside hospital organisation) for funding. Recent contribution is from a group of librarians who introduced 'bibliotherapy' which geared participants towards positive reading habit.

Results

Participation of undergraduate medical students throughout the paediatric posting is an essential element for the success of this programme. The coordinator has incorporated specific time on weekly basis for students' participation in RRR to expose them towards play with children. Activities organised must be able to benefit children for learning and development. Enhancing the growth of such activities requires multilevel commitment from everyone to impart a long term community programme.

Discussion

RRR is recognised as a high impact community involvement and engagement programme. This paper describes the involvement of different strata of personnel in the department from students, patients, parents, staff who volunteer and contribute for this programme. Microscopically, the community engagement model here is to ensure sustainable community work in an organisation such as the hospital setting. The focus group or community is the patients. Most governmental organisations have some form of community responsibility work either internally to cater the community inside the organisation or externally ie in a proper community setting. A program for community inside an organisation perhaps is a different niche area of focus, however successful activity depends on meticulous planning and execution. The only limitation here is that the department has yet to produce a structure and module approach to RRR. The activities have been recorded in tape, drawing, arts, photographs and even memorabilia. The benefits to the children include socio functioning, cognitive growth, psychological impact and improved emotional well-being.

It also gives the participating students a sense of belonging to the paediatric department by learning indirect skills and experiences. The values include being empathy, caring, altruistic and humanistic. Interaction is also improved when getting the children to be involved in the planned activities. This will reduce their fear of the hospital and strangers. Application of play by using arts is an important 'psychotherapy' especially in for children who faced stressful experiences or end of life.

As play is generally important to normalise sick children, there is a move towards introducing play as therapy, although this requires some form of fundamental training to ensure competency. Cultivating the process of learning for undergraduate medical students through play with children can be a life changing experience. Students' interaction with the patients include Problem Based Learning (PBL) and Problem Solving Learning (PSL) skills. The aspiration of medical school is towards heightening community work as part of the future plan.

Interestingly, two years after this programme for children in the hospital, the Malaysian government initiated a project serving the same population. Responding to the need of providing equal educational opportunities for all children, the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development introduced a project called "Sekolah Dalam Hospital" (SDH) or school within the hospital in 2012 for hospitalised children. This project has brought many inter-agencies collaboration within the government. SDH introduces a new educational approach aiming at giving opportunity for these children to learn, despite not being at school, thus improving their quality of life. Together with RRR, SDH has benefited the children in the hospital in general and more positive psychological outcomes are expected.

Conclusion

RRR is a novel model of community engagement within an organisation like the hospital. This is suited in the environment whereby volunteerism is an important part of community empowerment project towards hospitalised children. It gives benefit for both parties – for the staff, it indirectly promotes charity work and humanistic values and for patients, it assists in the child's psychosocial development.

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