Background: Modern medical care delivery increasingly requires coordinated teamwork by individuals in different professions. However, students being trained within a profession are rarely afforded formal opportunities to explore the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and contributions of other professions, or to learn strategies for effective teamwork. This can result in poor communication and inefficient team function, both of which negatively impact patient care. The Institute of Medicine and other national health care organizations have identified interprofessional (IP) education and team development as key areas needing improvement.

Course Goals: We developed a 4-week elective course that brings together 3rd and 4th year students in medicine, nursing, and pharmacy to learn about and practice team-based care. Major goals are to clarify the knowledge, skills, and resources that different professions contribute to health care problems and develop an understanding and respect for those contributions; to explore overlapping vs. unique roles and responsibilities of different team members; to learn to communicate constructively with the team; to learn to design patient care plans based on shared input from multiple professions; and to appreciate one’s own limitations and recognize when it is appropriate to seek advice or assistance from another profession.

Course Structure: Clinically based, experiential learning is emphasized and interwoven with didactic and reflective sessions. The course begins with an introduction to interprofessionalism, an overview of the education and roles of key professions, and the impact of team function on patient care. Two teams – each consisting of one student from medicine, nursing, and pharmacy – participate on the cardiovascular service and then on the renal service. The teams are assigned to patients at different sites and contribute to various aspects of care, including, for example, assessment of a patient’s disease and ongoing status, development of management plans responsive to the patient’s evolving state, discharge planning, and assessment of long-term care needs. Sites for the cardiology services include a cardiac intensive care unit, wards, and outpatient clinics; renal sites include the kidney transplant service (operating room, wards, pre- and post-transplant clinics), an outpatient dialysis clinic, and quality improvement meetings. Our goal is to provide students with a range of venues and interactions so as to expose them to different models of team-based care. In addition to interactions with onsite staff, a series of more structured “Meet the Professional” sessions allows students to meet with key personnel and exchange insights about team-based care. Separate MTP sessions are arranged for nursing, pharmacy, medicine/surgery, social work, palliative care, physical therapy, and nutrition services.

Evaluation of the Course: Support for the course from participating physicians and staff has been enthusiastic. Student feedback also has been quite positive. In particular, students comment about understanding better the knowledge, responsibilities, and day-to-day tasks of team members, and feeling more confident and skilled in knowing when and how to interact constructively with other members of a team.