Perceptions of students and academics regarding a new six week course in clinical pharmacy at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura (USJ), Sri Lanka

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BACKGROUND
Pharmacy training was first introduced in Sri Lanka in the early nineteen fifties. By 1957, a full-time pharmacists certificate course was introduced. However, the Bachelor of Pharmacy (B.Pharm) program was only introduced at USJ in 2006 with an intake of 20 students. At present, Sri Lankan pharmacists have limited clinical pharmacy training and experience. The current program is taught mainly by local medical practitioners and Bachelor of Science (B.Sc) degree holders also with no clinical pharmacy experience. However, there is a clinical pharmacy position in fourth year, and because of this gap in expertise, USJ requested assistance from their international colleagues to teach the clinical pharmacy course. A team of five pharmacists from Australia was invited to Sri Lanka to deliver a six-week course in clinical pharmacy.

AIMS
1. To explore the students’ and academics’ perceptions of the desired and actual outcomes of a six-week course in clinical pharmacy delivered by the Australian pharmacists.
2. To recommend strategies to bridge the gap between the desired and actual outcomes of the course and to improve the course for the next cohort of students.

RESULTS
All the students enrolled in the fourth year of the B.Pharm program at USJ (n=20), all the local academics (n=6) and four Australian pharmacists (n=4) participated in the study. However, not all local and Australian academics were available for all three focus groups due to work commitments. Several themes were extracted from the analysis. The main themes and subthemes are presented in Tables 1-3.

METHODS
Description of the clinical pharmacy course
The clinical pharmacy course was delivered by the team to 18 out of 20 fourth (final) year B.Pharm undergraduates at USJ over a 6 week period. 45 hours of lectures, 21 hours of tutorials and 12 hours of ward-based teaching sessions were delivered.

The lectures were interactive and the academics encouraged student participation in class. Tutorials and ward-based teaching sessions were held in small groups to maximise the learning experience. The tutorial tasks included theoretical questions and case studies where the students were encouraged to integrate their pharmaceutical knowledge into practice. At the ward-based teaching sessions, the students were tasked with obtaining medication history from a patient, gathering relevant information from the medical notes, determining the appropriateness of the prescribed medicines, then presenting their findings in the class and participating in facilitated discussion.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE
The students were examined at the end of the six-week clinical pharmacy course at ten OSCE stations. An in-course multiple choice question (MCQ) theory examination was held during the sixth week, and a final MCQ and short answer theory examination was conducted at the end of their teaching week.

Evaluation of the clinical pharmacy course
Students, local academics and the Australian academics were invited to participate in focus groups to obtain a variety of perspectives about the clinical pharmacy course. Focus groups were held three times: at the beginning of the clinical pharmacy course, at the half-way stage (after three weeks) and after the completion of the course (after six weeks). They were conducted three times to account for any changes in perceptions during the course. The focus group questions related to the participants’ expectations and reflections of the course. Verbatim transcripts of the focus groups were analysed by thematic analysis.

DISCUSSION
In summary, the desired outcomes of the clinical pharmacy course were to provide the students with sufficient knowledge, the ability to apply this knowledge to identify medication-related problems, and to use effective communication skills in order to resolve these problems.

ACTUAL OUTCOMES
The Australian pharmacists and academics observed that the current fourth-year B.Pharm students had sound theoretical knowledge from their previous studies but lacked the ability to apply this knowledge to solve medication-related problems. The local academics commented on how some of the theory from the clinical pharmacy lectures had already been covered in their previous subjects. Most of the students requested omitting some of the theory from the lectures and discussed the practical aspects of the course such as the tutorials and ward-based teaching sessions.

The Australian pharmacists believed that the students had very good communication skills when dealing with patients and other healthcare professionals. However, the students believed they still needed more practice in communicating with other healthcare professionals. The local academics identified that it may be difficult for students to discuss issues with other healthcare professionals because it is not current practice in Sri Lanka. The local academics postulated that with greater practical exposure this hurdle may be overcome.

Recommendations to bridge the gap between the desired and actual outcomes
To address the above issues, the study recommends:

- increasing the duration of the clinical pharmacy course
- increasing the number of ward-based teaching sessions and tutorials
- incorporating more problem-based learning sessions
- initiation of a post graduation training period to better prepare the students for practice

CONCLUSION
Overall, the study explored the students’ and academics’ perceptions of the desired and actual outcomes of the clinical pharmacy course. It was also constructive in identifying areas requiring improvement in the course for the next cohort of fourth-year B.Pharm students at USJ.