INTRODUCTION

Service-learning programs are increasingly adopted in medical education curricula as they have been shown to develop skills beyond that usually acquired in the classroom, such as communication, empathy, and professionalism; skills which have much bearing on their future career as health professionals.\(^1,2\) The traditional service learning approach has largely adopted the charity model, without much thought to the structural factors that perpetuate these situations of inequality. Thus the charity model is criticized for being patronizing, and a form of forced-volunteerism. In fact it only serves to sustain the currently existing hierarchical relationship between those serving and those being served, perpetuating the state of inequitable social distribution.\(^3\)

It was noted by Mitchell\(^4\) that without deeper reflection and examination of the root causes of social imbalance, service learning programs seem to provide no benefit beyond making students feel good about themselves. As such there is currently a move toward critical service learning or the change model, which seeks to remove the inequalities that create the circumstances of need; ultimately removing the need for service altogether. To illustrate the difference between the two approaches - a service learning approach might encourage students to conduct fund-raising activities for the poor, while social awareness urges students to scrutinize the political and economic decisions that created these social imbalances to begin with.\(^4\)

The first step toward adopting this approach is by having a discussion on privilege and oppression. The issue of privilege arises where certain parties or groups are denied things which are of value because of the group they belong to.\(^5\) Students involved in service learning programs are generally from more privileged backgrounds compared to the communities they serve, creating an asymmetrical relationship between the students and the communities they are serving.\(^6\) Often, coming from a state of privilege has led students to
adopt an us-them mentality; and form negative stereotypes of the communities they serve. Indeed the ‘who is to blame’ mind-set is pervasive among those doing the ‘serving’, assuming that the entire situation of those ‘served’ was predetermined by their socioeconomic background, race, gender etc. These preconceived notions may then interfere with their interaction with the populations served by these organizations.7

A study by Chiznik et al discovered that there is a connection between how students view themselves and how they view others, in that if students have a simplistic view of themselves, they would apply the same understanding to others.7 Thus it is imperative for students to critically reflect on having advantages simply because of the group they belong to i.e. the privileged one8, so that they are cognizant of structural factors that are present in situations of inequality; and do not attribute the inequalities to behavioural, personal, or psychological problems.9,10

Students should not be blinded to the current status quo and view it as acceptable or the norm, but instead realise it is a problem and question it4; and only by first acknowledging their own state of privilege will they be able to tackle the current systems of inequality.8 As noted by Green, a thorough examination and discussion on issues that bring about privilege such as race or class, is essential in order to avoid further perpetuating the states of imbalance, which created the need for service learning to begin with.11 This has been echoed by others who support discussions on privilege being front and centre.12,13

This situation is particularly relevant to students enrolled in a Community Engagement Elective (CEE) unit, which is offered to year-3 undergraduate Pharmacy students in a local private university; where students are attached to various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and undertake activities such as fundraising, and giving health-related talks; among others. Further details on this unit can be found elsewhere.14 In this CEE unit, there is little diversity in race and social class; and most students come from middle to high-income
backgrounds. The majority of students have also never had any personal experience with oppression and inequality, and have never been exposed to underprivileged communities. This can prove disastrous as when faced with issues of privilege for the first time, students feel uncomfortable, out of their element, and experience periods of disequilibrium; often displaying feelings of guilt, anger, and shame. This can then impede effective engagement with the organizations they are attached to, and as such it is equally important to identify and address any negative emotions students may feel with regard to privilege and oppression, as this will help students engage more effectively.

We thus conducted a Privilege Walk Activity (PWA)\(^9\), with the purpose of bringing about an awareness of privilege and making students realize that privilege and oppression interlock, and that both have most likely affected each one of them in one way or another; both positively and negatively. This activity, introduced by McIntosh\(^{15}\), is significant as it encourages each student to not only understand, but also realize their own positionality in terms of privilege and oppression.\(^7\)

It has been suggested that learning is enhanced when the educators and students share intersubjectivity \(^7\), and this can only be achieved if educators understand and address students’ preconceived notions about privilege and oppression to maintain on-going conversation and facilitate learning.\(^8\) Otherwise, social interaction can break down and lead to resistance. Thus the aim of the study is to investigate students’ perceptions of the PWA and its impact on their views on social justice. Feedback obtained here can be used to examine students’ preconceived notions about social justice issues to identify better ways to boost learning and mitigate resistance.

**METHODS**

**Study Design and Subjects**
This was a cross-sectional pilot study involving undergraduate Bachelor of Pharmacy students enrolled in the CEE unit in a private university. There was a total of 23 students enrolled in the unit.

Procedure

Participants were each given a card which detailed the purpose and expected learning outcomes of the PWA (Appendix 1), and were asked to stand shoulder-to-shoulder along a starting line. Then, as 20 “privilege statements” were read out one by one, the students each stepped forwards or backwards according to the privileges they had received or lacked as they were growing up. If a statement was not relevant to a participant or, for his or her own reasons, a participant did not wish to respond; he/she was to remain standing still. At the end of the PWA, participants shared their reflections as the facilitator asked a series of questions (Appendix 2).

Survey of Impact of Privilege Walk Activity

Upon completion of the activity, a verbal explanation was provided to students about the rationale for the study, what would be required of participants, the voluntary nature of participation, and the assurance that non-participation would not result in any form of disfavour. In addition, participants were assured of their confidentiality. Voluntary sampling was used and consenting students were invited to complete an online survey immediately after the activity, which was accessible for one month.

Study Instrument

The questionnaire was adapted from a study by Young, and edited to suit the objectives of the CEE. Face and content validity was done involving experts in the field of medical and
pharmacy education, service learning and survey design; utilizing a 3-round Delphi Method

Nine of the questions employed a 5-point Likert scale response, while the following three open-ended questions were asked at the end of the questionnaire:

1. Which of the statements did you find most meaningful or ‘eye-opening’? Why?
2. What thoughts were going through your mind as you moved forward or backward?
3. How might knowing about power and privilege affect your approach to your service-learning elective?

Ethics

Approval for the study was given by the Monash University Human Ethics Committee [CF15/2861-2015001178] relevant ethics committee.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analysed using Microsoft Excel 2013, and presented using descriptive statistics. Continuous variables were expressed by median with interquartile range displayed, whereas categorical/nominal data were presented using frequency and percentage. Response options of a 5-point Likert scale were assigned ‘Strongly agree’ (5) to ‘Strongly disagree’ (1). For open-ended questions, responses were analysed using content analysis, and common themes were highlighted.

RESULTS

A total of 18 out of 23 students responded (78.3%). There were 15 (83.3%) females and the average age of respondents was 21.5 (± 0.62) years with a range from 21-23 years. All students were of Malaysian Chinese ethnicity except for one who was of Malay ethnicity. Table 1 illustrates the median ratings of students in response to the PWA. More than 60% of
students strongly agreed that the activity provided them with some insight about the different privileges people had growing up. However approximately 20% of students indicated that they did not feel comfortable sharing their opinion and experiences about privilege. Nonetheless, approximately 80% claimed that the PWA helped them realise the effects of privilege and that it would help in their communication and interaction with those being served by the NGOs they will be attached to.

Four main themes emerged from the qualitative analysis. Statements here are presented verbatim, except where explanations or grammatical corrections are warranted.

**Preconceived notions**

Some students expressed shock that their own peers came from families where their parents had to work day and night to support the family, or had single-parents.

“That statement on "being raised in a single parent family" because I always thought it was a social issue and I never thought that some of my peers have experienced it.” (#8)

“To know that there are people coming from single parent families. It did not occur to me that people around me come from such a background. This further proves that one's background does not define a person!” (#4)

With regard to thoughts that were going through their minds as they moved forward or backward, a few expressed nervousness, shock, and surprise to see their friends moving to different lines.
"I am surprised that some people moved forward or backward which was out-of-not my expectation." (#7)

Feelings of gratitude
Two students felt that being on different lines did not justify any special privileges to anyone, and that everyone should be on the same line as they are all the same. On the other hand, many expressed gratitude as that it made them appreciative of their privileges they had.

"I am really thankful for what I have and I am determined to give back to the community." (#6)

"I'm lucky to have my parents even though I'm not as privileged as others." (#10)

"Parents working days and nights to raise the family. It reminds me of the effort they've put to cater for me having just enough, and also providing but the comfortable living I have today." (#14)

Effect of PWA on self-reflection
Students felt the session made them more reflective, and encouraged them to adopt a more optimistic approach to life; in spite of their circumstances.

"At first, it (moving forward or backward) was as though it was just to answer questions. In the middle part of the questions, it occurred to me that moving forward was when you have certain privileges and moving backwards was because you had to sacrifice certain things or..."
had less comfort than the others. Towards the end, it was just lines to remind you of what you had in life and what you should not assume everyone has the same things as you do. It taught me to reflect and be more selfless.” (#13)

Having obtained the knowledge of struggles faced by others also made participants realise the need to be more tolerant, instead of complaining and blaming others.

“As I moved forward, I felt grateful yet embarrassed. This was because it made me realize how blessed I am given the privileges and yet, I still whine or rant about petty things.” (#4)

It also made students realise that it is up to them to decide who or what they want to make of themselves.

“………So I think what determines your future is not solely your background but more importantly the decisions you have made.” (#7)

**Impact of PWA on approach to service learning**

On the final question about how knowing about power and privilege might affect their approach to their service-learning elective, students mainly commented that it taught them to be non-judgmental when dealing with these populations.

“Everyone has their own story and background. Never judge someone who has lower privileges. I'll treat everyone with dignity and respect.” (#10)
“It will affect strongly how I interact with the people I meet. It taught me to be humble again. As we grow up and especially socialising with people in private universities, I tend to forget how hard it has been for my parents to work and also that others who have less not so much luxury in theirs. I will treat them without any of the judgemental thoughts or stigma that society has about them, or the and not be fearful of mixing with certain groups in the community due to their different traits.” (H13)

Students claimed they felt more encouraged to serve the less privileged after the activity and now viewed the service learning elective as an opportunity to grow as a person. They also expressed the fact that being aware of the differences in power and privilege would encourage them to be more respectful, considerate, and sensitive during their attachments.

“It taught me to be more sensitive to others especially with NGO's that consist of less privileged children/women/families.” (H4)

“I learnt that we should be more open minded and considerate about others in the community as each member of the community we live in may have come from very different backgrounds and have had to face their own challenges in life.” (H5)

A student also commented that it helped embed in their minds the notion that everyone should be treated equally, irrespective of social status, and to treat others as how one would like to be treated.

“Being grateful and treat the people equally even though they are might be underprivileged.” (H7)
DISCUSSION

Introducing social justice into pharmacy health care education such as pharmacy not only produces competent professionals, but hopefully individuals ones who are aware of the reforms needed to solve problems of access and equity issues; and are also motivated to institute societal change. O’ Connell and co-workers addressed the importance of incorporating patient-centred, culturally-sensitive health care knowledge and skills into the pharmacy curriculum. They have highlighted the need to include topics such as health disparities, social justice, disabilities, religion, and sexual orientation. Educators have faced a myriad of challenges when incorporating the topic of privilege into a curriculum, thus community engagement or service learning may be an ideal pedagogical model for students to gain a learning experience on social justice.

From In our study, the a large majority of students agreed that they had learnt more about themselves in relation to privilege, and that the activity had challenged them and helped them realise the effects of privilege. Most students said that they were not ashamed about of the privileges they had, and believed that the PWA activity would help in their communication and interaction with the community they would be serving during their CEE. Students reflected on mentioned that they had never realised their individual own unearned privilege in society, and some expressed feelings of guilt, thankfulness, and sadness or empathy. Such responses are said to commonly occur when students are introduced to learning about privilege. Thus this study serves to demonstrate that having a single class session on privilege can bring about an awareness in pharmacy students of their own personal privileges. Such an activity, prior to their service learning elective, is hoped to will hopefully alter perceptions from a help them move away from the ‘who is to blame’ mindset and translate transcend to a better understanding of social power.
Ferber and Storrs observed that when teaching students about race and gender privileges, strong emotional reactions were observed. It is thus crucial that educators acknowledge and validate the feelings evoked within the students and have them reflect on inequities, reminding them of the inequitable present in society. However, while it is important to communicate that it is not their fault that inequities exist, it is also essential to state that awareness of that now that they are aware of the inequality is the basis for them to have an opportunity and a responsibility to be advocates of potential change. Placing them in their CEE with organizations that support social change is the next step on this on-going journey.

Less than a quarter (22.3%) of the students felt uncomfortable sharing their opinions and experiences about the PWA; and indicated that the activity did not help change their views on who is to blame for social inequalities. As noted earlier, such responses which might indicate denial or resistance, are not unexpected from a portion of the participants. It could also be due to the fact that some students already have prior understanding of privilege and its consequences to begin with. One way of dealing with denial or resistance is for the PWA facilitator to attempt to create as positive and safe an environment as possible for students to openly and honestly express themselves without fear of censure or judgement. The atmosphere has to be one of mutual respect, understanding, and empathy. Another way to reduce such discomfort is to work in smaller groups, which might enhance the feeling of safety. Yet another approach is to pre-empt such responses by saying upfront that feelings of discomfort, denial, and resistance are perfectly normal and acceptable; and are often the precursors to understanding and growth.

Limitations
Some limitations of this study are the small number of participants, and the lack of a control group. Due to the homogenous nature of the participants, we were unable to conduct any inferential statistical analyses, and findings might also be skewed and not represent the general undergraduate population in Malaysia or especially in other countries. In addition, since this was an online survey, we were also unable to further probe students based on responses to the open-ended questions, which might have limited the richness of the data collected.

CONCLUSIONS

The PWA managed to raise in participants an awareness of privilege, and an ability to empathize with others. Reminding students often that this is only the beginning of their social consciousness and activism, can motivate them to find their own avenues and niches along this path. This will then hopefully translate to future pharmacists who are eager to step away from behind the counter and out of their lab-coats; and become agents of positive societal change.

REFERENCES


