HOW HAS THE SPHPM SUMMER VACATION PROGRAM ENHANCED YOUR UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES?

As a biomedical science and law student, I am keen to take any opportunities that allow me to explore the overlap between my two courses and how I can use my knowledge in health and law to make a difference. Fortunately, in the SPHPM Summer Vacation Program, I was placed in the Health Law and Aging Research Unit based at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine. This was the ideal platform for me to explore both health and law in the real world and how I can use my two degrees in a career. In my coursework, there is very little overlap between law and biomedical science and I often wonder if I am doing something that will be useful and allow me to help others. The experience provided by the program has helped me establish that I am definitely studying the right course for myself and has given me renewed enthusiasm for my studies.

My primary task was to help Marta Woolford, a PhD candidate, to undertake a full text review (as part of a systematic review) on dignity of risk. This was a laborious task; however, I learnt a great deal about systematic reviews and could see how doing research on this topic has the potential to improve the lives of many elderly people. I had little knowledge of what a career in research would involve and I found myself enjoying the research as I could see there was a real purpose to the work I was completing. In my university coursework, I am more focused on trying to submit assignments on time and receive good grades. During the program I could see how research can really make a difference to people's lives and this made me more determined to produce my best possible work.

My supervisors, Professor Joseph Ibrahim and Associate Professor Lyndal Bugeja, were incredibly supportive and provided me with many opportunities beyond what I expected the program would offer. I attended an Elder Committee meeting at the law institute which has provided me with contacts in the legal industry. I was able to spend a morning with the duty Coroner where I sat in on her meetings with the forensic pathologists and police coronial support unit, I also saw part of an inquest in the Coroner's Court. I met with forensic pathologists who had studied law as well as medicine and another forensic pathologist with whom I was able discuss the new euthanasia laws. Meeting with these people allowed me to ask many questions and learn about careers I had never considered, as well as providing me with a greater support network. I also attended the Benetas industry breakfast where there was a panel discussion on DoR and the Lost and Found seminar (organised by Marta) which enhanced my understanding of dignity of risk and assisted with my research tasks.

I also wrote a letter to the editor of the Medical Journal of Australia in response to an article written on inequality in health, my letter was accepted for publication. This provided me the opportunity to hone my writing skills and receive extensive feedback and suggestions from both Marta and Joe. I also enjoyed the challenge posed by writing a letter to the editor, as I am used to the more formal styles of writing required by scientific reports and legal writing.

Through the SPHPM Summer Vacation Scholarship program I have seen the importance of research in public health and have begun to further develop my own research skills. Prior to the program, I had not seriously considered a career in research but given how much I enjoyed the program, it is definitely something I will consider in the future! The program has also provided me with an invaluable network of people both in the medical and legal industries.