The World Health Organization (WHO) defines interprofessional education (IPE) as “the occasions when students from two or more professions learn about, from and with each other to enable effective collaboration and improve health outcomes.” The WHO first recognized the importance of IPE in 1978, more than 30 years ago. Since that time, interprofessional educational initiatives have been slowly introduced into healthcare programs. Recent changes in healthcare policy and delivery have led to an increased awareness of the importance of IPE. Changes in accreditation in many healthcare programs have led to IPE becoming a required competency.

The Journal of Patient Safety estimates that more than 400,000 patients each year, who go to the hospital for care, suffer some type of preventable harm that contributes to their death. This makes medical errors the third leading cause of death in the United States. In 2001, the Institute of Medicine recommended redesigning systems and developing effective healthcare teams to achieve care that is patient-centered and supported by evidence-based decision-making. The systems would also take into account patient safety, avoidance of injury, time, efficiency and fairness.

Improving the healthcare system and reducing medical errors is a goal for the future. Many organizations feel that IPE is a mechanism to achieve this goal. Effective teamwork implies that all members of the team have a vested interest in the outcome of the patient’s care. In the past, many healthcare professionals worked in isolated silos. Although collaboration in patient care has always been common, this may or may not imply a vested interest in the patient’s outcome and still leaves room for isolation. Interprofessional education leading to interprofessional patient care will require a shift in culture. The shift reflects thinking within the framework of an autonomous professional vs. as a professional working within a team.

Culture changes are usually slow to take hold and are often met with challenges. The challenges associated with IPE include practicality in scheduling, time to bring students together, finding other professional schools to partner with, administrative support and faculty training. Information about interprofessional education is plentiful. Using the words interprofessional education in a Google search produced almost 2 million entries. There are also many journals and conferences dedicated to the topic. I recently had the opportunity to attend the 2014 Interprofessional Education Collaborative Conference in Virginia. This three-day conference provided information, resources, examples of ongoing projects, consultation with experts in the field, and an opportunity to develop curricula and projects for our students. The conference participants included faculty from multiple healthcare professions, including optometry.

Optometric education provides the knowledge, skills and role-modeling for future practitioners, but how do education and the profession of optometry fit into IPE and ultimately interprofessional practice? The profession is mainly practiced in outpatient settings, often in private or commercial practices. These practice modalities often lead to isolation. Will future changes in healthcare practice necessitate that all practitioners accept and embrace working within a team? The AOA Code of Ethics states “it should be the duty of all optometrist to keep their patient’s eye, vision and general health paramount at all times.” The ability to accomplish this task may require the ability to work within a healthcare team. As educators, it is our job to prepare students for the future.
Optometric education has shown a strong interest in interprofessional education. In this edition of the journal (see below), I invite all faculty members to participate in a future theme edition, which will focus on all aspects of interprofessional education. The sharing of accomplishments, lessons learned and outcomes will help others striving to implement IPE into their curriculum. This is an opportunity to showcase how the profession of optometry education is moving forward and embracing a culture change.

References