Teaching Practical Wisdom in General Practice

What is "practical wisdom"?

Practical wisdom is the ability to apply medical knowledge in real-world contexts, integrating experience, judgement, and patient factors.

Students don't learn this from textbooks – they learn it by seeing how you practice.

1. Think aloud: make your reasoning visible

Students often see *what* you do, but not *why*.

What to do

- Briefly explain your thinking during or after the consultation
- Include areas of uncertainty and how you approached them
- Highlight where you deviate from guidelines

Why it matters

- Translates theory into real-world decision-making
- Normalises uncertainty
- Builds clinical reasoning skills

Suggested phrases

- *"I'm not too worried about this because…"*
- *"Guidelines would suggest X, but in this situation, I'm choosing Y because…"*
- *"I'm about 70% sure, so I'm safety netting by…"*
- *"The key decision point here is…"*

This helps students see how textbook knowledge is adapted, not just applied.

2. Use stories: teach through experience

Practical wisdom is often stored as experience rather than rules.

What to do

- Share short, relevant clinical anecdotes
- Link clearly to the current patient
- Contrast past vs current practice

Why it matters

- Builds pattern recognition
- Adds depth and realism
- Helps students remember key lessons

Suggested phrases

- *"This reminds me of a patient I saw…"*
- *"I've been caught out before in a case like this, so now I…"*
- *"A pattern I've noticed over time is…"*

These stories transmit pattern recognition, clinical judgement and relational learning.

3. Make the implicit explicit

Much of GP expertise is subtle and easily missed.

What to do

- Explain decisions to *not* act
- Highlight judgement about timing, risk, and follow-up
- Point out relational and communication strategies

Why it matters

- Shows that good medicine isn't just action – it's judgement
- Teaches prioritisation and restraint
- Reflects real-world general practice

Suggested phrases

- *"I'm deliberately not ordering tests yet because…"*
- *"This is low risk, so time is actually a useful tool here"*
- *"I'm prioritising this issue today because…"*
- *"I'm watching how ready they are to change before pushing further"*

This helps students understand that good GP practice often involves restraint, timing, and judgement, not just action.

A simple teaching habit

Ask yourself: *"What was I thinking that the student couldn't see?"*

Encouraging student reflection

- *"What would you do here, and why?"*
- *"What's your level of certainty?"*
- *"What would make you more or less concerned?"*
- *"What's your plan if things don't go as expected?"*

Summary

Practical wisdom isn't taught by adding more information - it's taught by making expert thinking visible, shareable, and discussable.

Does this resource need to be updated? Contact GPSA: P: 03 9607 8590, E: admin@gpsa.org.au, W: gpsa.org.au
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