

Postgraduate students as simulated patients in communication skills learning and assessment

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Abstract

At the Manipal College of Medical Sciences communication skills learning and assessment has been carried out for over 7 years. Postgraduate MSc students in Pharmacology were recently used as simulated patients during learning and assessment of communication skills. The purpose was to train postgraduates to plan, initiate and conduct sessions and to help them in their future role as medical teachers. Common problems and illnesses in Nepal and South Asia were covered and the communication of drug and non-drug information to the patient was emphasised. The postgraduates enjoyed the sessions and found them interesting and useful. Feedback from 116 students was obtained using a modified Likert-type scale. The students were in favour of postgraduate students as simulated patients. Continuation and improvement of the sessions is planned for the future.

Keywords: *Communication skills, postgraduate students, simulated patients, Likert-type scale*

Introduction

Simulated or standardized patients have been defined as lay persons who have been trained to portray patients with a specific disease condition or problem in a realistic way (Wind, van Dalen, Muijtjens, & Rethans, 2004). These patients play an important role in teaching and assessment in many medical training programs. Medical students were used as standardized patients in assessing interviewing skills for pain evaluation (Mavis Ogle, Lovell, & Madden, 2002). At the Manipal College of Medical Sciences (MCOMS) choosing appropriate drugs for a disease condition and delivering drug-related and disease-related information in a meaningful way to the patient has been considered as a “transferable skill” in Pharmacology (Shankar, Mishra, Shenoy, & Partha, 2003).

At MCOMS the basic science subjects of Anatomy, Physiology, Biochemistry, Pharmacology, Pathology,

Microbiology and Community Medicine are taught in an integrated, organ system-based manner during the first four semesters. Communication skills learning and assessment has been carried out in Pharmacology for more than 7 years. Previously, non-teaching staffs at our institution were mainly used as simulated patients during the sessions. Patients from the hospital were used on a few occasions but it was difficult due to various reasons.

In 2004, MCOMS started an MSc Pharmacology program of 2 years duration. The overall objectives of the curriculum are to develop the qualities of initiative, creativity and leadership and to teach students to utilize sound judgment and logic in critical analysis of data (Kathmandu University, 2003). We felt that one of the methods of achieving these objectives is to involve postgraduates in teaching MBBS students. Involvement of postgraduates as simulated patients during communication skills sessions was one of the activities detailed.

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Table I. Demographic characteristics of student respondents ($n = 116$).

	Characteristic	Number (percentage)
Sex	Male	63 (54.3)
	Female	53 (45.7)
Semester	Third	60 (51.7)
	Fourth	56 (48.3)
Nationality	Nepalese	44 (37.9)
	Indian	58 (50.0)
	Sri Lankan	13 (11.2)
	Others	1 (0.9)
Financing	Self-financing	91 (78.4)
	Government-selected	25 (21.6)
Medium of instruction at school	English	102 (87.9)
	Vernacular	14 (12.1)

Method

We discussed with the postgraduates the objectives of the simulated sessions. The postgraduates were given an idea of what was expected of them, how to initiate the sessions and the usefulness of the sessions in their future career as medical teachers. The postgraduates were formally invited to participate as simulated patients.

The problems or illnesses covered were epilepsy (grand mal), multi- and pauci-bacillary leprosy, bronchial asthma, chloroquine-sensitive and chloroquine-resistant malaria, iron-deficiency anaemia, enteric fever, insomnia, diabetes mellitus type 1 and 2, hypertension, hypertension with bronchial asthma, tuberculosis, peptic ulcer, use of oral and injectable contraceptives, scabies and acute gastroenteritis.

Before each session there was a discussion with the postgraduates regarding the important teaching-learning objectives to be covered. Postgraduates were instructed to tailor their roles to emphasize how the illnesses interfered with the patients' personal life in the socio-cultural milieu of Nepal and South Asia. For example, in the communication skills session on multi-bacillary leprosy one of our postgraduates played the role of a primary school teacher in Western Nepal. The teacher had been removed from his job due to the social stigma associated with leprosy. He was facing social exclusion and was worried that he may not be able to find a bridegroom for his daughter.

During examinations the assessment is carried out by the faculty members using a standardized checklist. The postgraduates, however, provide feedback to the student group as a whole at the end of the exam session and emphasized important areas to be covered.

Results

Student feedback was collected using a questionnaire. The questionnaire had two parts. The first

part collected information on gender, semester of study, nationality, medium of instruction at school and financing of medical education. A total of 116 of the 146 students (79.4%) successfully completed the questionnaire. Sixty-three students (54.3%) were male; 60 students (51.7%) were from the third semester. Personal characteristics are shown in Table I. The second part measured students' attitudes towards the sessions using a 5-point Likert-type scale (Appendix). The median total score was 18 (out of a maximum of 25) and the interquartile range was 4. The score was higher among English medium students (Mann-Whitney $U = 479.0$, $p = 0.053$). The median score was 4 for all the individual statements and the interquartile range was 1, indicating an overall positive attitude. For example, the students felt that the postgraduates played the role of the simulated patient well and they felt comfortable while communicating with them. The postgraduates were friendly and made the communication skills sessions more interactive and interesting. In addition, they were in favour of continuing to use postgraduates as simulated patients in the future.

Feedback from the postgraduates was collected through informal feedback sessions. They enjoyed playing simulated patients and closely interacting with the students. Moreover, by participating in the sessions the postgraduates better understood how to plan, organize and teach communication skills sessions.

We plan to continue using postgraduates as simulated patients in communication skills learning and assessment and to improve on the sessions. Our postgraduates regularly attend ward rounds in the hospital and are becoming increasingly familiar with the different presentations of various diseases. By using this knowledge they will find it easier to emphasize how diseases interfere with patients' personal and social life. Our future communication skills presentations will simulate patients from different socio-economic and cultural groups

suffering from the illnesses listed above. In addition, we will elicit comments and suggestions by recording the sessions by video and replaying them back to students, postgraduates and facilitators.

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Appendix: Questionnaire used to evaluate student attitudes towards postgraduates as simulated patients

Sex: M/F Semester of study: Nationality:
Government selected/self-financing: Medium of instruction at school: English/Vernacular.

For the following statements grade according to the following scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = undecided; 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree with the statement).

1. The postgraduate students played the role of the simulated patient well.
2. I felt free and relaxed while communicating with the simulated patient.
3. The postgraduates playing the role of simulated patients were friendly and encouraged me to communicate.
4. The communication skills sessions have been made more interactive and interesting.
5. I am in favour of continuing to use postgraduates as simulated patients in the future.