



# Evidence of declining empathy in third year osteopathic medical students

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## KEYWORDS

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Outcomes

**Abstract** *Background:* Recent research in allopathic medical schools has indicated a decline in empathy amongst medical students during their first year of clinical rotations. Further studies have also found that this decline in empathy continues throughout residency training.

*Objective:* To determine if the declining empathy present in allopathic medical schools is occurring in our osteopathic institution and to establish the most effective way of collecting information regarding empathy from our medical student population.

*Design:* A questionnaire regarding empathy was completed by third year medical students following lecture and group-format sessions focused on improving awareness and willingness to use motivational interviewing for health promotion and prevention, in the context of cultural sensitivity and sensibility.

*Participants:* Seventy third year medical students at our osteopathic teaching institution.

*Results:* Questionnaire responses indicated that a larger percentage of students in the third year class at our institution were found not to be exhibiting empathy compared to those who were empathetic.

*Conclusions:* Third year osteopathic medical students exhibited decreased empathy in their questionnaire responses. Although preliminary, this finding lays the groundwork for further studies that will lead to the implementation of educational methods to promote empathy and aid students in developing an empathetic way with their patients, early on in their education.

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## Introduction

The education of medical students should include approaches to facilitate their evolution into ethical, empathic physicians that are prepared to provide comprehensive medical care to all persons. In fact, previous studies in patients with chronic diseases have shown improved outcomes when they receive culturally sensitive care from empathetic health care providers.<sup>1,2</sup> Unfortunately, research has shown that empathy has been shown to decline as students progress through their medical education.<sup>3-6</sup> A study performed by Hojat and colleagues at Jefferson Medical College concluded that there is a decline in empathy that occurs throughout the third year of medical school, at a time when clinical clerkships begin and empathy is most crucial.<sup>3</sup> Even further, this decreased empathy has been shown to continue throughout residency training.<sup>4</sup> In our preliminary study, we aimed to determine if osteopathic medical students at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine exhibited a decline in empathy during their third year of coursework similar to that discovered in the studies mentioned above.

## Materials and methods

Third Year Medical Students ( $N = 70$ ) at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine participated in a small group-format psychiatry module (approximately twelve to fourteen hours of classroom instruction and discussion). Three hours of this instruction were specifically aimed at improving awareness and willingness to use motivational interviewing for health promotion and prevention in the context of cultural sensitivity and sensibility. Teaching methods included utilizing group problem-

based learning, group discussion and viewing of culturally relevant videos. Following the instruction period, each student was required to complete a self-report questionnaire regarding empathy. The self-report questionnaire was composed of the seven questions listed below, with some of the questions based on a Likert-type scale format.

## Questionnaire

On a scale of 1 "not at all" to 5 "very much" please rate:

1. Prior to this lecture, did you feel you had adequate cultural sensitivity?
2. After the lecture, how comfortable do you feel regarding recognizing how culture may impact prevention/health promotion, psychiatric diagnosis and treatment?
3. How much do you feel that you are better able to appreciate the impact of culture on the presentation of medical and psychiatric syndromes?
4. How much do you feel that the video will help you to remember the impact of culture on the presentation of medical and psychiatric syndromes?
5. The footage from commercial movies was effective in conveying the material?
6. The PowerPoint information from the lecture was effective in conveying the material?
7. The EBM-case presentations were effective in conveying the material?

To determine the presence of empathy in the students surveyed, responses from question 1 were compared to those from question 2. All Likert-type scale questionnaire responses were analyzed using one-tailed paired *t*-tests. If a decrease in response from question 1 to question 2 was observed, it was

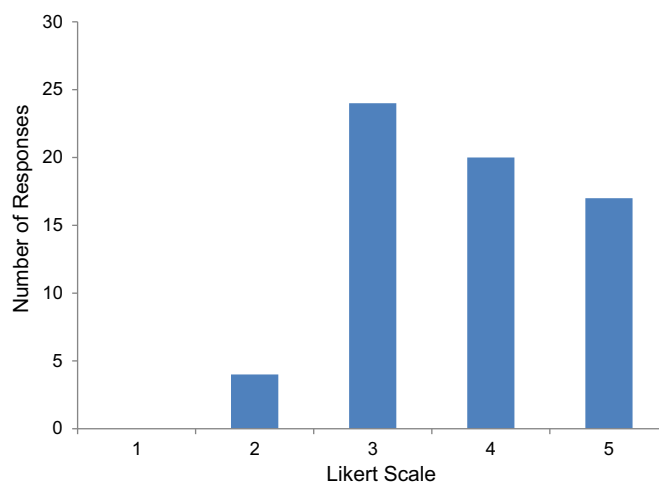


Fig. 1 Distribution of students' responses to question 1.

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