Clinical Simulation in Nursing (2016) 12, 368-376

Clinical Simulation in Nursing

www.elsevier.com/locate/ecsn

Featured Article

Nursing Student Perceptions of Standardized Patient Use in Health Assessment

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KEYWORDS
undergraduate nursing;
nursing education;
simulation;
standardized patients;
health assessment;
critical thinking

Abstract

Background: Peer physical examinations (PPEs) are often used to teach health assessment (HA) skills in undergraduate nursing education; however, the use of standardized patients (SPs) has been shown to have a greater impact on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning.

Method: Survey results from students who completed their HA final head-to-toe assessment evaluation using PPEs versus SPs were compared in this mixed-method descriptive study.

Results: Students who used SPs indicated their assessment required more critical thinking and less memorization compared with those who used PPEs for their HA final head-to-toe assessment evaluation ($p < .05$).

Conclusion: The use of SPs and case-based scenarios is an innovative teaching modality that can improve undergraduate nursing students' critical thinking and assessment skills.

Cite this article:
Slater, L. Z., Bryant, K. D., & Ng, V. (2016, September). Nursing student perceptions of standardized patient use in health assessment. *Clinical Simulation in Nursing, 12*(9), 368-376. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2016.04.007.

Many undergraduate nursing health assessment (HA) courses have been taught in the same traditional manner for decades (Wearn, Bhoopatkar, Mathew, & Stewart, 2013). To learn physical assessment skills, students are often asked to take part in peer physical examinations (PPEs), where students practice and validate assessments on one another. Because most peer partners are "healthy patients," students rarely have the opportunity to assess abnormal findings in a standardized manner. Additional potential problems may arise in having students practice and validate assessments on each other, including uncomfortableness with being examined by their peers and exposure of medical conditions to others. PPEs are well accepted among medical students, particularly when sensitive areas, such as genital or breast examinations, are excluded (Rees, Wearn, Vnuk, & Sato, 2009;

The authors report no real or perceived vested interests that relate to this article that could be construed as a conflict of interest.

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1876-1399/$ - see front matter
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecns.2016.04.007

Wearn & Bhoopatkar, 2006). Wearn et al. (2013) studied the acceptability of PPEs among nursing students and found that they were also tolerant of PPEs that excluded sensitive areas. However, the study noted that third-year nursing students were significantly more willing to participate in PPEs compared with first-year students, and male students were significantly more willing to participate in PPEs than female students, indicating the need to further explore the use of PPEs in nursing education.

Key points

- The use of SPs in undergraduate health assessment courses may promote critical thinking over simple memorization of assessment skills.
- Students prefer using SPs over PPEs for health assessment examinations as the experience is more realistic and prepares them for assessments in the clinical setting.
- Comprehensive feedback from SPs can further students' development of psychomotor and communication skills.

A potential alternative to PPEs is the use of standardized patients (SPs) in physical assessment courses. SPs are trained individuals who portray patients or medical conditions in a realistic and consistent manner (Association of Standardized Patient Educators [ASPE], 2011). Although SPs have been used as a learning and evaluation tool in medical education since the early 1960s (Wallace, 1997), their use in nursing education is relatively new. In addition, SPs in nursing education are predominantly used in nurse practitioner programs and have only recently been introduced into undergraduate nursing education (Becker, Rose, Berg, Park, & Shatzer, 2006). Studies have shown that SPs are an effective pedagogy in medical education to improve communication skills, teach psychomotor skills, and enhance clinical knowledge (May, Park, & Lee, 2009). Similarly, SPs have been shown to be effective in nursing education in developing psychomotor skills such as blood pressure measurements (Sarmasoglu, Dinc, & Elcin, 2016), teaching interpersonal communication skills to nurse practitioner students (Lin, Chen, Chao, & Chen, 2013), and improving therapeutic communication in undergraduate psychiatric nursing education (Webster, 2014). A recent meta-analysis conducted by Oh, Deok-Jeon, and Koh (2015) demonstrated that simulation using SPs in nursing education had a significant effect on cognitive, affective, and psychomotor learning.

The use of SPs during HA could potentially decrease students' anxiety, increase critical thinking, validate the student's assessment, and enhance learning through immediate feedback from the SPs. However, literature on the use of SPs in physical assessment courses is limited. Yoo and Yoo (2003) found that the use of SPs to teach clinical fundamentals to undergraduate nursing students enhanced their clinical and communication skills and improved clinical judgment. Two further studies revealed that nursing students who practiced HA skills on SPs during scheduled laboratory sessions scored higher on their final performance evaluation compared with students who practiced on their peers (Bornais, Raiger, Krahn, & El-Masri, 2012: Gibbons et al., 2002). Another study that evaluated the use of SPs versus manikins to teach cardiac and pulmonary examinations to pharmacy students revealed that SPs were significantly more favored by students as a learning method (Grice, Wenger, Brooks, & Berry, 2012). Similarly, Luctkar-Flude, Wilson-Keates, and Larocque (2012) found that undergraduate nursing students were significantly less satisfied learning respiratory assessment skills on high-fidelity human simulators (HFS) compared with SPs and community volunteers (CVs). The study also revealed that students in the HFS group reported feeling significantly less prepared for clinical than the students in the SP and CV groups (Luctkar-Flude et al., 2012).

New York University Rory Meyers College of Nursing's Health Assessment Course

The New York University Rory Meyers College of Nursing (Meyers) baccalaureate in nursing program is an upper division nursing curriculum. The nursing courses are offered during the last four semesters of the program, typically referred to as the junior and senior year of a traditional 4-year baccalaureate program. At Meyers, traditional four-year and accelerated nursing students (second-degree non-nursing baccalaureate graduates who have fulfilled Meyers' nursing prerequisites) take the same four semesters of nursing courses. The only difference between the two types of curriculum delivery is that traditional students take their nursing sequence courses over four academic semesters (e.g., fall, spring, fall, spring) and have the summer off in between their junior and senior years. Accelerated students take their four semesters of nursing sequence courses sequentially, without a summer off. For example, accelerated students admitted in the fall take nursing courses in the fall, spring, summer, and fall terms; those admitted in the spring take them spring, summer, fall, and spring.

All traditional students take the HA course in the fall during their first nursing sequence term while accelerated students may take it, depending on when they were admitted, in either the fall or spring term. It should be noted that a traditional student would only be taking HA in the spring term if he/she had during the fall term: (a) withdrawn from HA, (b) taken a leave of absence, or (c) failed HA at the end of the term. Meyers' HA course consists of a weekly didactic session and a weekly on-campus clinical simulation session that takes place in our Clinical Simulation Learning Center (CSLC). The on-campus clinical simulation learning sessions through fall 2013 used traditional teaching methods with practice on student