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Research

Evaluation of student perceptions of standardized patient simulation on patient counseling confidence during introductory pharmacy practice experiences

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Abstract

Objective: To evaluate student pharmacists' overall perceptions about how standardized patient (SP) encounters influence their counseling confidence during introductory pharmacy practice experiences rotations, as well as their communication skills in patient counseling.

Methods: A longitudinal survey using retrospective pre- and post-assessment method was given to first-year pharmacy students over two consecutive years via a self-administered questionnaire. The survey measured students' perceptions about (1) the general usefulness of SP simulation on IPPE performance and (2) the impact of SP simulation on patient counseling confidence before and after SP encounters.

Results: Of the 128 students, the majority of students agreed that interacting with SPs was useful ($N = 114$) and realistic ($N = 94$). Overall, 76% ($N = 102$) also agreed that the SP program helped improve their interactions with real patients during IPPE rotations. Comparing patient counseling confidence, students' perceptions are significantly improved for all counseling skills and techniques after SP encounters ($p < 0.0001$).

Conclusions: Students' perceptions and acceptance of the SP simulation were positive. Using SPs could significantly improve student patient counseling confidence during IPPE rotations.

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Keywords: Standardized patients; Patient counseling; Self-efficacy; Student pharmacists; Experiential education

Introduction

The 2013 American Association of College of Pharmacy's Center for the Advancement of Pharmaceutical Care (CAPE) acknowledged that effective communication is important to educational outcomes under Domain 3: Approach to Practice and Care.¹ Student pharmacists need

to demonstrate competency to communicate and collaborate with patients and other health care professionals. The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) recommended that communication skills, such as interviewing techniques, active listening, empathy, and problem solving, should be emphasized in the pharmacy program.² In current curricula adopted by colleges/schools of pharmacy, several techniques provide students with active-learning experiences to acquire communication skills, including role-playing with other students, faculty, or staff members and using standardized patients.³ Standardized patients (SPs), who have been used in health care education

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for many years as a method of teaching and assessment, are individuals trained to portray specific types of patients (e.g., exhibit specific emotions and project personality) or different medication problems.^{4,5} Well-trained SPs demonstrate high accuracy of portrayal in providing history information and physical examination information and acting out psychiatric disorders, according to the requested scenarios.^{6,7} Standardized patient simulation is utilized not only to assist students in developing communication and intervention skills^{8,9} but also as a powerful assessment tool that helps students acquire clinical skills. The SP evaluation technique has been shown to be beneficial to both students and instructors by providing a method of assessing communication abilities in addition to the knowledge on drug therapy.¹⁰ Some pharmacy programs have used SPs to conduct the performance-based assessment in the objective structured clinical exam (OSCE).^{11,12} The feedback and assessment provided by SPs complement the work of pharmacy faculty and provide students with a valuable context for sharpening their patient care skills. Because of the demonstrated benefit in the assessment and training of pharmacy students, the use of SPs has gradually become more prevalent in pharmacy education curricula. In addition, studies have found that pharmacy students prefer having community volunteers as SPs, instead of staff members and peers, to conduct the interactive communication practice.¹³ The main reasons for this preference are the believability and opportunity to work with an individual who the pharmacy students do not know.

Experiential education is another important approach for students to experience an increase in their knowledge and develop skills and values, where educators engage learners in direct experience and targeted reflection.¹⁴ Experiential education has become an integral component of the doctor of pharmacy (PharmD) degree program and is required in the curriculum as an ACPE accreditation standard.¹⁵ The ACPE standards require the introductory pharmacy practice experience (IPPE) to account for a minimum of 300 hours in the curriculum.¹⁵ Currently, all colleges/schools of pharmacy have placed first-year student pharmacists in experiential education rotations.

Rickles et al.⁵ investigated the impact of SPs on student learning. Students were required to attend a laboratory session every week to interact with assigned SPs who acted out specific patient roles. Rickles et al.⁵ found that a lecture–laboratory course with SPs had a significant impact on student communication skills across various time points through the semester. Since this assessment was restricted to the simulated learning environment inside the pharmacy school, however, we cannot apply the findings in the clinical practice environment. Additionally, we are unable to detect whether the SP encounters that students had in the laboratory sessions benefitted the learning experience with real patients during experiential education in pharmacy education.

Since some schools have allowed first-year pharmacy students to practice medication consultation with SPs before IPPE rotations, there is a need to assess the impact of SP encounters on students' counseling during IPPE rotations. The objective of this study was to evaluate student pharmacists' overall perceptions of how SP encounters influence their confidence during IPPE rotations and communication skills in patient counseling. This research was based on the hypothesis that pharmacy students would significantly improve their confidence and skills in patient consultation during IPPE rotations after SP encounters.

Methods

The university's institutional review board approved this longitudinal study. The study population consisted of first-year pharmacy students who were enrolled in the pharmacy practice lab in the fall semester and IPPE community pharmacy practice in the spring semester in two consecutive years (2013 and 2014).

The pharmacy practice lab in our PharmD curriculum is a series of courses designed to engage students in a variety of activities that simulate professional practice scenarios (Table 1). Students practiced their communication skills in the lab through patient counseling exercises, using SPs from the community who were trained for each specific laboratory, as described in Table 1. Three lab sessions used SPs

Table 1
Summary of first-professional-year pharmacy practice lab activities using standardized patients

Activity	Topic	Lab description
1	Empathy and active listening	This lab allows students to build upon their communication skills and knowledge regarding empathy, active listening, and reflective listening. Students will role-play specific scenarios with standardized patients.
2	Obtaining medical history	Students will obtain a medical history and the standardized patient will provide each student with a prescription. Students will then evaluate the medical history in relation to the prescription.
3	Motivational interview	Students will utilize the motivational interviewing communication techniques to conduct patient-centered interviews. Communication strategies will be developed to increase patient adherence to a target health behavior.
4	Objective structured clinical examination (OSCE)	Students will be assessed the performance of a series of tasks to evaluate readiness to begin the IPPE, including clinical knowledge, communication skills, and problem-solving skills.

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