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Research

Implementation of a Communication Skills Laboratory

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Abstract

Objectives: To describe a Communication Skills Laboratory and assess student performance, ability to meet North American Pharmacist Licensure Examination (NAPLEX) blueprint competency statements, and student confidence in communication-related patient care activities.

Design: Essential elements of pharmacist communication, Counseling, Drug Information, and Written Documentation, were incorporated into a Communication Lab. Student performance was assessed using grading rubrics and scores. A student survey assessed how effectively the curricula met the NAPLEX blueprint objectives and perceptions of confidence in performing communication tasks.

Assessment: Performance, assessed via student grades, improved significantly in the three main activities of the lab ($p < 0.001$, $p < 0.001$, and $p < 0.001$). Pre- and post-laboratory surveys were completed by 89% and 87% of students, respectively. Student's mean scores assessing the curriculum's ability to meet NAPLEX competencies increased significantly from 3.40 to 3.80. Mean score in confidence rating increased significantly from 2.83 to 3.75.

Conclusion: A Communication Skills Laboratory improved student performance, met NAPLEX competencies, and increased self-rating in confidence in patient care activities involving communication.

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Keywords: Communication skills; Student perception; Simulation; Curricula

Introduction

A Communication Laboratory was developed and integrated into a capstone course to provide extensive simulation practice opportunities to counsel, provide drug information, and document medical interventions. This article describes the design of a Communication Laboratory and discusses the evaluation of the innovation's effectiveness in improving student competence and confidence in communication related to essential patient care activities. The ability to communicate is an essential skill for the practicing pharmacist.^{1–3} Guideline 12.1 of the 2011 Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE)

Standards version 2.0 states, “pharmacy graduates must possess the basic knowledge skills, attitudes and values to practice pharmacy and to be capable of this essential skill they must be able to communicate and collaborate with patients, caregivers, physicians, nurses, other health care providers, policy makers, members of the community and administrative and support personnel to engender a team approach to patient care.”¹ Moreover, effective communication plays an important role in overall health outcomes.^{3,4} Individual differences, such as cognitive ability, maturity, and social and interpersonal skills, affect students ability to communicate.^{5,6}

A dedicated communication skills laboratory as part of pharmacy education has rarely been described in the literature, although mentioned in medical education.⁷ Often, communication skills are taught in a communication course with an associated laboratory or more commonly as part of pharmacy practice laboratories.^{4,8} The Communication

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Laboratory was developed with an educational philosophy that focused and structured activities in a simulated setting regarding communication skills with the intention to improve student confidence in these activities, enhance attainment of NAPLEX competencies,⁹ as well as increase student performance of these skills.

Design

Background

At MCPHS University—Boston, communication skills are developed and assessed in various instructional formats throughout the professional curriculum. Students complete a required communication course and participate in mock counseling in pharmacy practice labs, as well as patient counseling during introductory rotations. This capstone course, Advanced Practice Management (APM), historically consisted of a didactic portion, an Institutional Laboratory, a Community Practice Laboratory, and a Physical Assessment Laboratory. Students were assessed on communication abilities, directed at both patients and other health care practitioners randomly during each of the laboratory components, essentially at the will of the faculty facilitator. Student feedback, course evaluations, faculty assessment of student communication skills, and clinical practice faculty impression during advanced clinical rotations were that students had difficulty in mastering the various aspects of pharmacist communication when integrated with other activities and demands on their time. Thus a dedicated lab to advance student communication skills was developed. The new curriculum, in the version that this study evaluates, was implemented in Fall 2011 for third professional year (PY3) students. The skills and activities intended to be addressed in the Communication Lab are listed in [Table 1](#). Both oral and written communications were addressed through lab activities, as all types of communication are needed by pharmacists to establish positive and productive relationships within their practice sites.¹⁰ During the spring semester following this laboratory, these communication activities were interspersed through the original practice laboratories more closely, replicating actual practice settings.

Learning objectives

Students participate in three communication modules in the fall semester ([Table 1](#)). The goals of patient counseling are to train and reinforce the skills necessary for student pharmacists to provide patients with the information to manage their medication therapy and disease state effectively.¹¹ According to Goggin et al.,¹² in order to develop these competencies, courses that focus on the development of brief and effective patient-centered counseling are needed. Providing informative, concise consultations and balanced, evidence-based replies to drug information inquiries in simulated patient and practitioner settings is a

challenge for students and pharmacists.^{13,14} With the unique responsibility that pharmacists possess in providing drug information to health care practitioners and patients, the goal of the Drug Information activities is to prepare students to provide quality information to health care providers and patients. In addition, the goal of the written exercise is for students to gain experience in documenting clinical interventions.

The Communication Skills Laboratory is designed to allow each student repeated exposure in each assessment area with faculty feedback to foster confidence and competence. Communicative self-efficacy could be described as a person's level of confidence in his/her ability to effectively communicate.⁶ Research has demonstrated that a feeling of self-efficacy regarding a behavior often translates into one performing that behavior effectively.^{5,6,15}

Educational environment

The Communication Skills Laboratory is a component of the APM course and includes a didactic section, institutional, community, and physical assessment laboratories, and is a component of the PY3 curriculum. Prerequisite coursework includes pharmacology, therapeutics, interpersonal communication, and drug literature evaluation and is a co-requisite of didactic coursework in advanced therapeutics and seminar. Student skills are assessed by both course coordinators and a pool of 42 adjunct practice faculty. Each adjunct faculty member has a minimum of two years community pharmacy practice experience, with a range of up to 30+ years of pharmacy experience. Efforts to establish consistency among faculty in the evaluation of student performance include training in use and implementation of grading rubrics, as various individual competencies within lab sections may be assessed by different faculty members. Training includes course coordinator instruction on the use of the rubric and mentoring with an experienced faculty member. Additionally, prior to evaluating students, each adjunct faculty member must independently review and score four previously validated student sessions. Training on use of rubrics has been shown to reduce inter-rater variability.¹⁶ All individual student assessments are digitally recorded. The provision of video recording allows for an internal measure of grading consistency, as full-time faculty have the option of reviewing assessments for grade validation. For the present survey sample, course coordinators have conducted a random review of assessments to ensure grading consistency.

The three skills of each laboratory module are completed within a three-hour assessment, requiring the students to effectively balance their time. Simulated patient scenarios are a common type of educational activity for communication skills training in pharmacy education, and they had been utilized in the prior curricula and were chosen for the Communication Laboratory.^{4,8,10,17,18} Simulated health care provider scenarios were implemented for the first time for

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