

Service users' perceptions regarding their involvement in a physiotherapy educational programme in the UK: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Background The impact of user involvement in allied healthcare education is complicated by a lack of understanding of this concept both practically and ideologically. It is important to analyse whether service users perceive taking part as an 'honour' or as 'agents of change'.

Objective This study explored service users' perspectives of their involvement in a UK college-based physiotherapy educational programme.

Method A Grounded Theory approach utilising semi-structured interviews was conducted with eight of the service users who took part in the physiotherapy programme. The analysis of the interviews was carried out according to a grounded theory framework.

Results All the service users wished to foster a sense of a partnership and communicate what it was like on the 'other side'. Their personal agendas and possible motivation for taking part were to challenge the students assumptions regarding disability, to give something back for their healthcare and to communicate their dissatisfaction with present healthcare provision.

Conclusion The participants felt that they could be instrumental in a process of change. One way to address this is to include this programme as an integral element of the current move towards life-long learning that supports their professional development in a range of authentic situations. Their reflexive dialogues with the service users can be documented as part of a reflexive portfolio with the service users as mentors.

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Keywords: Healthcare education; User involvement; Perceptions of service users; Theory–practice gap; Life-long learning

Introduction

The involvement of service users, patients and carers in healthcare education is gaining momentum and apart from a concerted effort to implement curricula with an ethos of patient-centred care there continues to be pressure from government reforms that individuals and communities should be placed at the centre of healthcare and its delivery [1]. The White paper [2] sets out the Government's long-term vision for the future of the NHS with an emphasis on putting patients at the heart of everything the NHS does and subsequently the Health and Social Care Bill [3] again stresses the importance of patient-centred care.

This has stimulated research into this area which in many ways has created more questions than answers. One might assume that the research would show that by engaging with service users during their education student health

professionals would become more patient/client-centred and begin to make connections between scientific theory and technique in their curricula and 'real life' experiences. However the difficulties of translating the academic curricula into real-life situations continue and the perennial debate regarding the so-called theory–practice gap is one of concern [4].

Added to this Cowden and Singh [5] question the rhetoric of 'user involvement' and other related ideas such as 'empowerment' and 'managing diversity' indicating that they are nothing more than legitimating devices 'for managerial elites' (p. 20). This is borne out by service users often being called 'consultants' rather than 'activists' [5].

Despite this criticism Morgan and Jones [6] in their substantive review of papers addressing pre-registration and post-registration health professionals' programmes reported overwhelming benefits for service users and gave insights into why they became involved. Carers reported that the experience gave their caring experiences meaning and value and both service users and patients reported enhanced confidence [7,8] feelings of self-esteem and self worth [9] and

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Table 1
Participants' profiles.

Service user	Gender	Age range	Occupation (present or previous)	Condition
A	Female	50 to 60s	Formerly a teacher	Double amputee
B	Male	50 to 60s	Finance consultant	Tetraplegic
C	Female	80 to 90s	Housewife/retired	Arthritis/knee replacement/skin condition
D	Female	50 to 60s	Formerly office worker/coffee factory/waitress/presently cares for grandchildren	COPD
E	Male	60 to 70s	Night security	2 back operations/knee replacement
F	Female	50 to 60s	Formerly worked in a pub	COPD
G	Female	60 to 70s	Owner of an art gallery	On-going back problems
H	Female	70 to 80s	Formerly health service manager	Long term carer/supporter for husband with dementia

empowerment [10]. It would appear from the literature that service users either see themselves as being 'honoured' by being invited to take part in sessions with students or as agents of change, that is, seeing their task as changing how future health professionals perceive their role and eventually how healthcare is delivered.

Ultimately it would be rather simplistic to say that interactions between students and service users alone will change healthcare delivery as it is a far more complex phenomenon and in critical realist terms it would ultimately depend on the settings the students and patients find themselves in, the power differentials in these settings and moreover how patients and students perceive their agency in these settings [11]. However hypothetically these programmes could enhance how both students and service users respond to their circumstances in the healthcare arena as demonstrated by the mental health service users in Speer's [10] study who reported an increased sense of authority after reviewing students' assessments of their current clients.

With this in mind this study using a grounded theory approach will explore the service users', patients' and carers' perspectives of their involvement in a programme in which they have been actively involved as patient-educators. This has previously been evaluated by the students who took part in the same programme [12]. This two-year programme spans higher education levels 4–6 (years 1–3 BSc (Hons) physiotherapy) in which patients, carers and service users interacted with students in small groups as 'historians' nurturing the students' interviewing and clinical reasoning skills (level 4) and in a question and answer session sharing experiences of caring for their relatives (level 5). At level 6 they acted as assessors of the students' work as well as leading small group critical debates about service provision (see Thomson and Hilton [12]). There is very little research in physiotherapy education that has evaluated both the students' and service users' perceptions of the same programme and it is hoped that

this paper will complement the few papers that have reported on this important topic.

Methods

Grounded theory was selected as the theoretical framework in which to base this study because it is characterised by its critical approach to conducting qualitative research and developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed [13].

Participants

The sampling process of this study was purposive initially and then superseded by theoretical sampling as the data highlighted in which direction to proceed. All the service users who participated in the programme were invited to take part in the study and eight agreed to be interviewed for no longer than 45 minutes at a mutually agreed time and place (see Table 1). For ease of writing all participants are referred to as service users unless it is deemed important to specify otherwise.

Data analysis

Each stage of the analysis was discussed with a researcher experienced in Grounded Theory (known as peer review) so that possible bias by the researcher could be explored and challenged. In addition transcripts of the audio tapes of each interview were returned to each participant for them to verify that it was an accurate account of what took place. Fig. 1 shows the process of the analysis. A constant comparative analysis was used to refine the initial coding and to produce categories. Axial coding was carried out to refine the categories further to formulate the questions asked in each successive interview in line with an iterative process.

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