

Virtual simulated patient in assessing communication skills for medical students: Exploring the experiences and perceptions of the students and examiners

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Abstract

Background: Simulated patients (SPs) are commonly being used during the assessment of history taking and communication skills in objective structured clinical examination (OSCE) for medical students. However, recruiting reliable and highly-committed SPs can be quite challenging. Virtual simulated patient (vSP), a computerised virtual patient may offer several advantages over actual SPs by providing a controllable, standardised and safe learning environment, especially involving sensitive issues. The aim of this study is to explore the perception of medical students and examiners on using vSP during OSCE. Methodology: We developed a vSP prototype based on our preliminary data on the critical components of doctor-patient communication. We conducted content, face and construct validities on the developed vSP. The vSP was then used during OSCE to assess communication skills in medical students. We conducted focus group discussion among the students and in depth interview among the examiners to explore their experience and perception on using vSP during the assessment. The sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Results and Discussion: Three themes emerged from the focus group and interview: advantages over actual SPs, limitations and added value of vSP. Both students and examiners highlighted that vSP has a great potential to be used in assessment. It provides standardisation and can be used repetitively. However, technical issues were their main concern. Conclusion: This study demonstrates that using virtual patient helps to address the challenges of using real SPs during OSCE. We identified several technical issues that must be addressed before it can be effectively used for actual practice. Future recommendations: The vSP prototype opens up more opportunities for future research to evaluate the feasibility and practicality of using virtual patients in training medical and other health professions students. It also promotes further development of immersive virtual reality tools to be used in health professions education.

References (maximum three)

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