

A survey of clinical empathy training and assessment at UK medical schools

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Abstract

Background

The benefits of enhancing practitioner empathy include better patient outcomes and improved job satisfaction for practitioners. Evidence suggests empathy can be taught and is an 'outcome for graduates' in the UK as stipulated by the General Medical Council. Despite this, empathy training at medical school is not mandatory and the extent to which students are given empathy-specific training and how this is assessed is unknown.

Summary of work

A survey was developed through a consultancy and pilot process to ensure validity and reliability. Questions explored what empathy-focused training is offered and whether training is assessed. Descriptive statistics were used to describe survey findings and thematic analysis was used to explore free text comments.

Results

Twenty-eight schools (response rate 70%) were included in the analysis. Twenty-six reported their undergraduate curriculum included some form of empathy-focused training. Over half of schools reported that training was evaluated with a variety of methods including via OSCE and reflective practice. One medical school reported using an empathy-specific tool to measure the impact of empathy-focused training. Thematic analysis revealed two overarching themes related to challenges associated with the development of empathy focused training and assessment and challenges with student and faculty engagement. All schools agreed empathy training should be on the undergraduate curriculum.

Discussion

This is the first nationwide survey of empathy-focused training at UK medical schools. While some form of empathy-focused training appears to be provided on the undergraduate curriculum at most UK medical schools, empathy is rarely specifically assessed.

Conclusion

Most medical educators do not feel their school does enough to promote empathy and the majority would like to offer more.

Implications for further research

Further research to better define clinical empathy would support the identification of pedagogical approaches or tools to nurture student empathy and the most suitable means of assessing it.

References (maximum three)

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