Empathy and communication in nursing education

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Introduction

Medical professionals undergo a rigorous educational experience that tests multiple abilities such as treatments and other health care services. Training in communication skills is a recognized area of need for medical professionals but lacks evidence for incorporation into formal curriculum. Consequently, communication between the caregiver and patient may be inefficient and problematic. Empathy, as one of the core communication skills for medical professionals is imperative because expression of empathy and word choice can result in trust, or lack thereof, and impact patients’ level of comfort in disclosing information that is critical for medical care. The goal of this study is to analyze empathetic statements used by nursing students during virtual patient exam training and create robust assessment categories for tailored feedback.

Methods

After IRB approval, the data for this research were provided by Shadow Health, a start-up company that develops virtual simulations and interactive learning solutions for nursing students. A team of three undergraduate students used systematic content analysis methods to code empathy statement submitted by 343 nursing students (intercoder reliability Krippendorff’s alpha = .8). Coding categories, informed by message design logics (O’Keefe, 1988), differentiated between statements that include and not include conventional expressions of empathy and solutions for challenging communication scenarios brought up by the virtual human, Tina Jones.

Codebook

1 = expressive: no conventional expression of empathy (n = 104)
2 = conventional: use of a conventionally expected expression of empathy (n = 350)
3 = rhetorical: use of a conventional expression and attention to patient’s physical or mental health needs (n = 91)

STUDENT ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE AND COMMUNICATE EMPATHY

We observed that patient’s expression of physical pain and loss of a family member had higher follow-up with empathetic statements. Opportunities that discussed body image, use of an asthma inhaler, and controlling diabetes, had the least amount of empathetic statements. However, except for the first opportunity, not all nursing students were able to discover additional information about the patient and express support and empathy.

Conclusion

The results of this study can inform interventions that would lead to a higher level of care for patients through improvements of nurse-to-patient communication. With the coding guideline we are creating, we can suggest which students may need further training in empathy and focused instructor feedback.

References


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