Enhancing communication skills in undergraduate pre-professional health students through a bibliotherapy training initiative

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Introduction: Research has shown the need for improved patient-provider communication and healthcare providers with empathetic communication skills. Better communication has been linked to increased patient satisfaction and adherence to treatment plans, improved health outcomes, and a decrease in patient reports of medical malpractice. A summer internship program at a hospital system in upstate South Carolina, which serves as a pipeline for future health professionals, provided the opportunity to introduce undergraduate students to the importance of patient-provider communication. The program, “MedEx Academy,” is offered to high school and undergraduate students interested in healthcare careers. Students are given the opportunity for clinical experiences and career development, as well as mentoring from healthcare professionals. Bibliotherapy, or reading therapy, is a centuries-old intervention method that is re-emerging as a method to promote patient healing. Bibliotherapy may also be used to improve patient-provider relationships and foster increased patient-provider communication. During three summers of MedEx, students participated in a bibliotherapy training and patient communication initiative.

Instructional and/or assessment methods: All students in “Tier III” of the MedEx program (college sophomores and juniors) participated in a bibliotherapy program during three consecutive summers. Students underwent training prior to patient interactions, which included instruction on HIPAA protocols and patient privacy, interaction with patients, and tips for reading aloud. During the second summer session, the use of standardized patients was also introduced into the student training protocol. Following training, students participated in bibliotherapy by reading aloud to patients at various healthcare facilities, including assisted living and behavioral health environments. Each session lasted approximately 30 minutes and readings were chosen from a collection of poems, religious texts, short stories, and excerpts from novels that were selected specifically for the program. Patients completed pre- and post-session questionnaires to measure calmness and mood, and students recorded self-reflections about the experience. Students also completed pre- and post-program surveys to assess patients.

Program evaluation/results: Results from three summers of reading sessions were recorded. Data from bibliotherapy sessions, including student observations of patient interactions and student reflections, will be reported in this presentation. An overview of program development, structure, and implementation, with particular focus on the innovative use of standardized patients, will also be reviewed for participants. Student survey results and comments showed an increased appreciation for the importance of the patient-provider interaction, as well as the value of reading therapy and increased communication with patients in general.

Discussion/implications: In order to produce a healthcare provider workforce capable of effectively communicating with patients, effective training in patient-provider communication training is critical. The results of a bibliotherapy teaching initiative with undergraduate students indicated an increased understanding of the importance of effective communication and relationship building, as well as improved communication skills. The innovative MedEx Academy program model, in combination with bibliotherapy, has the benefit of simultaneously increasing communication competence among future healthcare professionals, improving patient outcomes through healing, and providing health students with a personal understanding of the patient experience.