STANDARDIZED BUT NOT PATIENTS: EMERGING ROLES FOR SPs IN SYSTEM-BASED PRACTICE

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BACKGROUND

As more accrediting bodies, both at the medical school and residency levels, move toward competency-based evaluation, it becomes clear that one of the most challenging competencies to teach and assess is that of systems-based practice. Learners must be responsive to and learn to call on resources from the larger healthcare system, specifically developing skills related to teamwork, advocacy, technology, safety, and coordination of care. Consequently faculty must find new instructional methods to address these competencies. Given the larger context of learning about healthcare systems, it is clear that patients are not the only consumers or parties involved in the process. Thus we chose to expand the traditional roles of our standardized patient (SP) pool to include members of the healthcare team and other people affected by the healthcare delivery system.

PURPOSE

The Basic Science of Care Course at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine is targeted to second year medical students and graduate level nursing students. The course is designed to teach students about healthcare systems, interprofessional care, systems problems that arise in outpatient and inpatient settings when communication is absent or ineffective and strategic plans are not in place.

METHOD

Members of the SP pool were trained to act in one of four cases, as

- an executor for the estate of a patient who died from a medical error (patient was the sole caregiver for an elderly parent)
- a reporter asking a barrage of questions about an anticipated flu vaccine shortage, including about who was actually going to receive the vaccine
- a clinic administrator who discovered that a doctor left an electronic medical record open for a patient to access
- a patient who meets with multiple barriers to receiving care when trying to obtain screening workups such as dxa scans and mammography

Each case included

- a script and background information about the goals and objectives of the case
- an outline of the primary concerns of the SP playing a role
- detailed descriptions of what the job was for someone in that role, based on interviews of University Staff occupying those positions
- discussion time with the course directors

In this 8-week course, 3 weeks were focused on the 4 SP cases described here. Students as a team received the underlying situation on week 1, researched the problem on week 2, then presented their findings/solutions to the SP on week 3, with the SP challenging the students when (s)he felt the students were not addressing the root of the problem or the issues that would be important to someone in this role.

RESULTS

Faculty felt that this methodology provided unique opportunities, for example,

- students have opportunities, through these interactions, to advocate for change in systems of care and to present suggestions to the "consumers" of those systems
- SPs now take on the roles of members of or non-patient participants in a healthcare system (although not healthcare providers, because the background knowledge for these roles was deemed to be too difficult to assume with minimal training)
- the standardized patient training team has expanded activities into courses that have not traditionally used SPs

SPs felt that they

- facilitated students' understanding of the "big picture" better than they had in other classes
- facilitated students' understanding of how family or patient advocates can be a very important part of the decisions they make and can be used as allies
- learned how challenging the healthcare environment can be for those who are running the system
- better understand how system-wide decisions are made

Challenges for the SPs included

- feeling overwhelmed by needing to be the "expert"
- understanding the role/responsibility of the members of the healthcare system

CONCLUSIONS

Training SPs to act as other members of the healthcare delivery system is feasible

- broadens the role of the traditional SP
- promotes the goals and objectives of the systems-based practice competency
- enhances the SP's understanding of more global healthcare advocacy and policy issues

Although there are challenges, this is a feasible and exciting new method for the use of SPs.

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