

A narrative based exercise to introduce clinical training to medical students: a pilot study

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Introduction

A narrative based approach was adopted in an activity conducted as part of a five day orientation programme for medical students in the third academic year, who were starting clinical rotations. Groups of students were allocated to patients to elicit their life stories, in the form of a narrative, similar to a biography.

Methods

An open, written feedback and responses to structured questions were obtained from the students regarding the activity. 154 responses were obtained from the open feedback which was then qualitatively analyzed using a grounded theory approach with identification of major themes. The structured questions were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS.

Results

The themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis were issues related to the initiation of medical students to clinical training, communication with patients, understanding about the patient and a holistic approach to care, students expectations of the activity and perceived relevance to future training and the impact of the logistics of the activity on the students' experience. It was found that the majority of the students found this activity interesting and useful, stating that it improved communication skills and helped them to view the patient as individuals instead of 'clinical cases'. They found it a good initiation to clinical training and history taking. They also felt it helped develop skills of empathy. Some students reported confusion in differentiating life story from standard medical histories. They also reported difficulty in communicating with the patient due to the large number of students in each group. Analysis of the structured questionnaire revealed that 97% of the students found the activity to be useful, and 98% found it to be helpful in learning the background of the patient.

Conclusions

This narrative based learning experience was found to be accepted by the majority of students at their first contact with patients and helped to introduce a more patient centered approach. Therefore it is suggested to use this model in introductions to clinical training in the future.