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Introduction

Expert patients interviews can be used to teach healthcare professionals about the personal impact of living with specific conditions. In Undergraduate (UG) physiotherapy education, because of the importance of the physical skills that the students need to learn, the wider implications of neurological illness and disease can be overlooked.

The World Health Organisation (WHO,2001) has suggested a holistic model (illustrated with examples in Figure 1) to classify the health and disability of people with illness and disease in different domains.

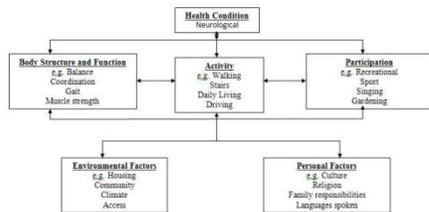


Figure 1: (Adapted from WHO, 2001)

The physiotherapy UG education's emphasis on teaching the body, structure and function domain, can detract from the importance of the whole patient experience. There is a need to also consider activities and participation, including people's personal and environmental factors. These psychosocial aspects of the patient experience are difficult to convey in the UG physiotherapy curriculum delivery. A novel teaching approach was explored to facilitate students interviewing expert patients with neurological conditions in small groups.

Aim

The objective for the session was to facilitate the students' understanding of the psychosocial impact of a range of specified neurological conditions.

Patient's stories

Patient associations and support groups were approached for availability of 'expert patients' to come for half a day to be interviewed with small groups of second year physiotherapy students. The groups represented included the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society, the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Association, the Guillain Barre Syndrome (GBS) support group, Disability Sport Wales and the Stroke Association. In some instances, the organisations also sent their officers, but on the whole the people who came either had recovered from the illness and/or were living with the conditions.

Neurological Away day

The whole cohort (94) was divided in half and students attended for half a day. Students were divided into tutorial groups(15) to interview 2-3 expert patients. Lecturers were present for the whole day and facilitated the process as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Expert patient with a lecturer facilitating the students asking questions:



The students moved between the expert patients in the break out rooms, each session lasted around 45 minutes.

Students had developed questions prior to the session, but in reality once they met the people and heard their stories, different questions emerged. Some patients became fatigued (patient with MS) and some quite emotional (patient recovered from GBS), which the lecturers present gave appropriate support. The stories were very powerful and had an impact on both the students and the lecturers.

Student Feedback

Formal feedback was obtained by a short questionnaire with open questions and the University Quality Assurance online system. 82% of students strongly agreed that the content and delivery of the session had met their expectations. In fact many comments were asking for more time to be given to this type of learning experience.

Results

The positive perspectives the expert patients gave changed the student's perceptions about neurological illnesses.

Whilst it is not good news to be given the diagnosis of a neurological condition, the expert patients who participated in the day, enhanced the students concepts of living with such conditions.

'...Although it's life changing it's not the end...people were very positive and inspiring ...before I thought illness/ injury was always a negative social impact, however it made me understand how many positives can come out of it...'

The variety in expert patient's social circumstances awakened the students to the financial costs of house adaptations and the inequalities of grants to support this:.... *'It raised my knowledge of the support available but there's not enough funding- it's not fair!'*

Additionally students became aware of National Health Service (NHS) inequalities *'... lack of funding in Wales hinders patient -focused working (in relation to Stroke).'*

The importance of the physiotherapeutic relationship came out in the stories and many students commented on the importance of listening and treating people as individuals:

'...it reinforced that I must see the patient as a person with hobbies, interests and dependents, not just an illness or condition'... 'patients want to voice their opinions, this will motivate them and help them progress.'

The challenge of helping student to develop empathy is a concept that is difficult to explain. However the expert patients illustrated this eloquently:

'people value empathy, not being patronised...it developed my empathy for patients who have accepted their disability, I realise it's not all about the physical aspects.'

Conclusion

This learning opportunity enhanced the UG physiotherapy students understanding of the psychosocial issues and the psychological impact of neurological illness. Further consideration is being given to the wider use of patient stories.

References

World Health Organisation (2001) International Classification of Functioning
Available from [http:// www.WHO.ICF](http://www.WHO.ICF)

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