



Communication skills program in the first semester: An experience report

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LETTER TO EDITOR

Since 2001, Brazilian Guidelines for undergraduate medical education highlighted the need to include communication skills (CS) in the curriculum¹. At the Federal University of Santa Catarina (South Brazil), CS were taught in the third year in theoretical classes as an overview of physician-patient relationships, and in a non-systematic way in practical classes. In 2013, theory and practice were aligned, mediated by reflection, by adding three classes: CS overview; responding to strong emotions; and giving bad news. Two Portuguese translation of modules from DocCom, a web-based audiovisual learning resource on CS in Healthcare (AACH, DUCOM, 2005-2015), were used. In 2015, we started to teach CS to the 53 students registered in the first semester of our medical course. We report on the program in the first semester of the course and students' perceptions of it.

The CS program consisted of seven 1.5-hr face-to-face sessions with all students, co-taught by the authors, a PhD student and a medical school professor. The content included CS overview and importance in healthcare; relationship-centered care, building relationships and gathering information; students' experiences in the medical course; and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). To encourage continuous reflection and align theory with practice, before or after theoretical brief presentations, additional resources were used: exercises to raise awareness of verbal and nonverbal communication, drawings on medical students' life experiences, reflections about the poem "After a While" by Veronica Shoffstall and after listening to Bach's Brandenburg concerto #1; DocCom modules #6 "Build a relationship" and #8 "Gather information" (viewed online to prepare for class) followed by face-to-face small group discussions (6-7 students in each) about CS learned and their practice in role-play; peers' and patients' interviews; students' MBTI identification (at distance) and group dynamics.

Students' perceptions were evaluated using closed questions answered on a Likert scale ranging from zero (*very poor*) to 5 (*excellent*) and with open-ended questions to justify their answers. The mean overall score was 4.0 (n = 53, SD=1.34). Students' comments highlighted the program value because they were considered people, having the opportunity to reflect about their lives, their relationships with each other and were prepared for future relationships with patients, in a semester overloaded with biomedical content.

We conclude that the program is important for students' personal and professional development. We intend to further expand the CS program throughout the course. We are happy to share our course materials.

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