

Communication Skills of Medical Students in Primary Care – Female Students Perform the Best

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Introduction

- Literature shows gender differences in communication skills of medical students in self-, peer- and tutor-evaluation favoring female students.
- But patient satisfaction related to the physicians' gender is still controversial.
- Our focus was on how the student's gender influences the patients' perception of communication skills in a primary care setting.

Methods

In 2012, all 3rd year medical students from the University of Bern on practical training in a general practice received feedback from two pre-defined patients on their communication skills. The non-anonymous, formalized feedback given directly after a consultation contained 5 questions and was rated on a 4 point Likert Scale.

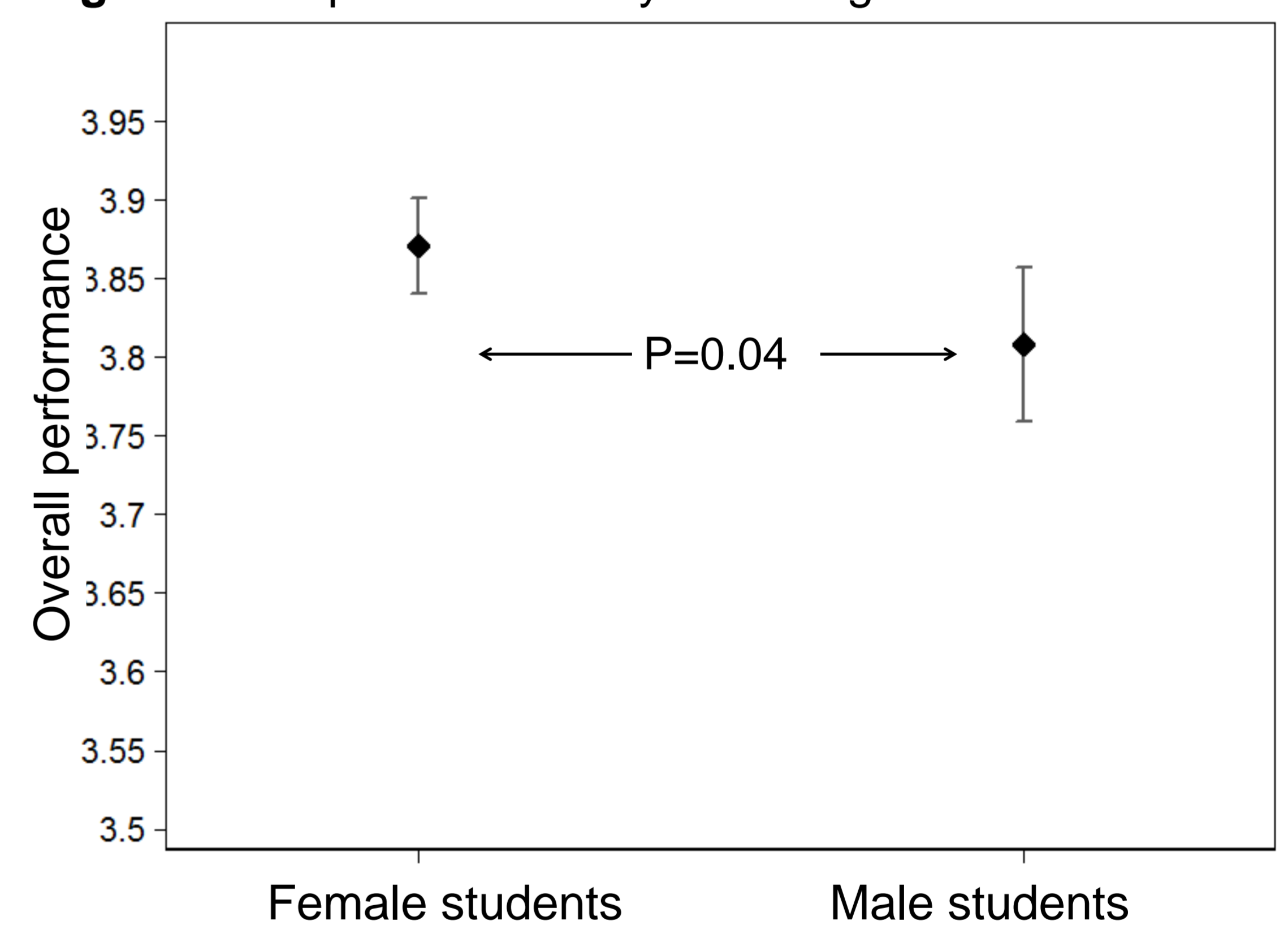
Evaluated skills

- Being interested
- Being empathetic
- Being a good listener
- Having enough time
- Creating an atmosphere open to address all issues

Results

273 patients were recruited. The mean age was 54.7 ± 19.5 years, 54% were female. The evaluated medical students were mainly female (63%). However, the distribution of gender of patient and medical student was at random ($p=0.06$). Overall, patients estimated students' performances high: 156 patients (57%) totally agreed that students were interested, empathic, good listeners, took time and let an atmosphere open to address all issues. The rest estimated their performance to be almost good while only in 5 students patients judged their performance in selected items to be rather not good. However, female students performed significantly better than male students ($p=0.04$) (Figure 1), especially in being interested ($p=0.05$), and in being empathetic ($p=0.02$). The results were independent of the patients' gender.

Fig 1 Overall performance by student gender



Conclusions

Primary care patients rated communication skills of medical students during practical trainings high. However, female students performed better especially in showing interest and empathy. Patients gender did not influence this outcome. It remains to be shown how communication skills finally correlate with patient satisfaction.

Take-home message



Patients evaluated female students' communication skills better than those of male students in their 3rd year during consultation in a general practice.