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Enhancing Cultural Communication Competency in the Undergraduate Physiotherapy Course

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Background: Effective communication is crucial when providing quality health care, however, linguistic and cultural barriers increase communication challenges. Despite the need for physiotherapists to offer culturally competent care, little is known about how cross-cultural communication skills are integrated in undergraduate programs.

Methods: A module incorporating advanced communication skills was designed in the physiotherapy undergraduate course, including the development of cross-cultural communication skills. Both knowledge of minority groups and cultural awareness were discussed. Challenging personal and professional ethnocentricity and analysing strategies to address culture-sensitive issues during the subjective assessment were explored. Throughout the duration of the module, role-plays were undertaken by peers, simulating patients from four minority groups. Students and teachers' evaluation of role-play were analysed in tutorials, using the Communication Assessment Scale (CAS), in order to understand how each perceived the one's own performance at cross-cultural communication. Written informed consent was obtained and confidentiality was guaranteed.

Results: The module was undertaken by 51 second-year students. A total of 194 assessments from 16 role-plays were analysed. The average self-evaluation was 3.35 (SD=.54; from 1-totally disagree to 5-totally agree), peers' evaluation was 3.7 (SD=.39) and teachers' evaluation was 3.47 (SD=.58). Comparing role-play moments, the average evaluation conducted by teachers increased from 3.39 (SD=.61) to 3.73 (SD=.57), contrasting with the peers' evaluation, which decreased from 3.75 (SD=.51) to 3.52 (SD=.34).

Discussion: Results showed that peers' and teachers' scores were higher than self-evaluation scores. This suggests the difficulty to perceive ones' own cultural and communication competencies. The increased average scores obtained by teachers' evaluation may indicate improvement of students' cross-communication skills. Peers seemed to increase their awareness about communication skills, becoming more critical during evaluations about cultural differences. Using video recorded role-plays seemed to promote their understanding about how to adapt communication skills with patients from ethnic minorities, despite the difficulty of students simulating patients.

Conclusion: By increasing cultural awareness, students are expected to anticipate cultural differences, integrate them into care and build trusted professional-patient relationships. Learning from giving feedback to others, discussing cultural issues and making sense of their own culture seemed to help students to increase their cross-communication skills.