

Title: Enhancing Communication Skills of Interns training in Surgery, using OSCE as a formative assessment tool

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Context & setting: In India, prior to being certified as doctors, and after their final qualifying examination, medical students do a rotating internship to acquire basic skills required to function as a doctor. Although imparting communication skills and its assessment play an essential part in the making of a doctor, it does not as yet find a formal place in the curriculum of under graduate medical education in India.

Why the idea was necessary: It had become apparent, during informal discussions with the faculty, that the interns had a few deficiencies in communication skills. The areas in particular were, explaining a patient's condition using simple language, giving advice to a patient getting discharged, breaking bad news and taking an informed consent. A need was therefore recognized, to have an intervention that will enhance communication skills and also to have an appropriate assessment tool.

What was done: A survey was conducted among all the members of the faculty to gauge their perception on the need for communication skills being part of the curriculum, and also to identify specific lacunae in the communication skills of the interns using a 5 point Likert rating scale.

A batch of seven interns, undergoing training in Surgery, underwent this programme. Members of the faculty of Surgery were trained to become assessors of objective structured clinical examinations (OSCE). They were trained to impart communication skills to the interns, by actively discussing after patient encounters, organizing role plays and by other interventions. The interns underwent a pre and post intervention OSCE, which had peer reviewed SEGUE framework checklists (for providing feedback on communication skills) and trained standardized patients. The four stations were: explaining a patient's condition using simple language, giving advice to a patient getting discharged, breaking bad news and taking an informed consent. Assessment was done by the faculty as well as the standardized patient. Immediate feedback was given to the intern.

The interns underwent peer reviews (each by the other six), quantifying each others' observations on SEGUE framework check lists, during real patient encounters. Programme evaluation was done by obtaining feedback from the faculty, interns, and standardized patients.

Evaluation of the results: The faculty survey revealed that most of them agreed that communication skills should be taught formally and during internship. Lacunae in the communication skills were also identified.

Statistically significant improvement was noted in the interns' scores in the post intervention OSCE assessed by the faculty, indicating overall improvement in the

communication skills as well as in the four specific areas of focus. Improvement was also noted in the scores obtained by standardized patients' assessment, but this was statistically significant only in the overall communication skills and in the area of breaking bad news.

The interns felt that there was a definite impact of the programme in the improvement of their communication skills. The faculty felt that it was practical, as did the standardized patients.

This pilot suggests that this programme could be extended to all the interns, paving the way for its introduction as a formal curriculum on communication skills.

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