Using Unannounced Standardized Patients to Assess Patient Education and Counseling Skills in Ambulatory Care Settings

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Introduction, Institutional Context and Educational Objectives

Effective medical practice relies in part on patient education and counseling skills. Objective Structured Clinical Exams (OSCEs) are valuable assessment tools, but there is always the concern that trainees do not accurately demonstrate their true practice behaviors. Data from real patients, on the other hand, may have high “face validity,” but they can be compromised by the emotional complexities of doctor-patient relationships.

Unannounced Standardized Patients (USPs) are gradually emerging as a desirable alternative since they integrate actual practice with the standardization and rating expertise of SPs. The Primary Care Internal Medicine Residency Training Program at New York University initiated a USP assessment project to
1) explore the feasibility of integrating USPs into a resident clinic setting
2) examine the effectiveness of 4 USP patient education and counseling cases
3) assess the reliability and validity of a comprehensive rating form

Assessment Methods

Four cases were developed to depict scenarios that are prevalent in the residents’ medical practice, can be simulated with a high degree of fidelity and standardization, and do not require invasive procedures. Although all 24 residents in the program were notified about potential USP encounters within a 2-month-period, only the eight PGY-2’s were visited by 4 USPs each. After each visit USPs completed a lengthy performance evaluation and debriefed with a USP trainer. In addition to information about the residents’ performance we also recorded reports about environmental factors (e.g., interactions with ancillary personnel) that may affect the assessment tasks.

Program Evaluation Results

Data is currently being analyzed.

Discussion/Implications for Field

USPs can significantly enhance the assessment of residents’ patient education and counseling skills. They can also provide valuable insights into the socio-cultural environment in which trainees practice.