Using expert patient interviews to enhance the undergraduate physiotherapy students learning experience

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Introduction

Expert patient interviews can be used to teach healthcare professionals about the personal impact of living with specific conditions. In Undergraduate (UG) physiotherapy education, because of the importance of the physical skills that the students need to learn, the wider implications of neurological illness and disease can be overlooked.

The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001) has suggested a holistic model (illustrated with examples in Figure 1) to classify the health and disability of people with illness and disease in different domains.

Patient's stories

Patient associations and support groups were approached for availability of 'expert patients' to come for half a day to be interviewed with small groups of second year physiotherapy students. The groups represented included the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society, the Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Association, the Guillain Barre Syndrome (GBS) support group, Disability Sport Wales and the Stroke Association. In some instances, the organisations also sent their officers, but on the whole the people who came either had recovered from the illness and/or were living with the conditions.

Neurological Away day

The whole cohort (94) was divided in half and students attended for half a day. Students were divided into tutorial groups (15) to interview 2-3 expert patients. Lecturers were present for the whole day and facilitated the process as illustrated in Figure 2.

The students moved between the expert patients in the break out rooms, each session lasted around 45 minutes.

Student Feedback

Formal feedback was obtained by a short questionnaire with open questions and the University Quality Assurance online system. 82% of students strongly agreed that the content and delivery of the session had met their expectations. In fact many comments were asking for more time to be given to this type of learning experience.

Results

The positive perspectives the expert patients gave changed the student's perceptions about neurological illnesses.

Whilst it is not good news to be given the diagnosis of a neurological condition, the expert patients who participated in the day, enhanced the students' concepts of living with such conditions.

Conclusion

This learning opportunity enhanced the UG physiotherapy students understanding of the psychosocial issues and the psychological impact of neurological illness. Further consideration is being given to the wider use of patient stories.

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References