

MEDICAL STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD THE DOCTOR–PATIENT COMMUNICATION

Codruța Alina Popescu, Assist. Prof., Dr., Șoimița Mihaela Suci, Prof., Dr., Anca Dana Buzoianu, Prof., Dr., "Iuliu Hațieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: Background: The desire to help others is stated as a primary motivation for pursuing a career in the medical professions. Patient-centered care refers to the focus of the practitioner on the condition from the patient's perspective and seeing the patient as a whole person, independent of the condition. The concept of patient-centered care provides an organizing framework for helping others during real-world interactions between practitioner and patient. Medical educators have emphasized the importance of teaching patient-centred care.

Objectives To describe and quantify the attitudes of medical students towards patient-centred communication and to examine: (a) the differences in these attitudes between students in early and later years of medical school; and (b) factors associated with patient-centred attitudes.

Methods: We surveyed 107 students from University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Iuliu Hațieganu" Cluj-Napoca (42 students from pre-clinical, 18 from 3rd year and 47 students from clinical years of medical school). Our survey utilized the Patient–Practitioner Orientation Scale (PPOS), an instrument designed to measure individual preferences towards various aspects of the doctor-patient relationship. Total PPOS scores can range from patient-centred (egalitarian, whole person oriented) to disease- or doctor-centred (paternalistic, less attuned to psychosocial issues). Additional demographic data including gender, age, family medical background and specialty choice were collected.

Results: There were statistically significant differences in student attitudes toward patient-centered care between the students in preclinical and clinical years.

Conclusion: Our data suggest that students in later years of medical school have attitudes that are less doctor centred or paternalistic compared to students in earlier years.

Keywords: *Attitude; doctor–patient communication; education, medical students.*

Background:

The desire to help others is stated by the medical students as a primary motivation for pursuing a career in the medical professions (1, 2).

The doctor–patient relationship is central to the delivery of high quality medical care, and has been shown to affect patient satisfaction and a variety of other biological, psychological, and social outcomes (3).

Patient centred care is one aspect of the doctor–patient relationship that takes into account patients' preferences, concerns, and emotions. Patient-centered care refers to the focus of the practitioner on the condition from the patient's perspective and seeing the patient as a whole person, independent of the medical condition and it has been proposed as a mechanism through which favorable patient outcomes are achieved (5,6). In recent years, medical educators have recognized the importance of patient-centred care by instituting a variety of curricula to teach communication skills, professional values, and humanistic attitudes and behaviors to medical students (7).

Medical schools need to have a patient-centred agenda starting from the early years of training (8).

Objectives: The objectives of this study is to describe and quantify the attitudes of medical students towards patient-centred communication and to examine: (a) the differences in these attitudes between students in early and later years of medical school; and (b) factors associated with patient-centred attitudes.

Method

We conducted a survey among the medical students at University of Medicine and Pharmacy "Iuliu Hațieganu" Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The study included 107 students.

The study was conducted in June 2014 and included the Patient-Practitioner Orientation Scale PPOS (Krupat et al., 8). In addition, demographic data about the student were collected. The PPOS (9) is a 18-item questionnaire that measures, on a six-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), attitudes toward the physician–patient relationship in a “sharing” dimension and a “caring” dimension (9, 10, 11). The 9-item Sharing domain assesses whether respondents believe that power and control should be shared between doctors and patients as well as the degree to which the doctor should share information with the patient. The 9-item Caring domain measures whether respondents consider the expectations, feelings and preferences of patients to be critical elements of the doctor–patient relationship (9, 10, 11). We calculated a separate “caring” and “sharing” scores for the PPOS. Mean scores are ranked and divided into three groups: high scores (patient-centered, with a mean score of 5.00 or greater), medium scores (greater than 4.57 but less than 5.00) and low scores (doctor-centered, mean of 4.57 or less) (11). Higher scores indicate more patient centered attitudes.

Statistical analysis

We used analysis of variance ANOVA with post-hoc Dunnett T3 to examine the effect of gender and year of medical school on mean PPOS scores (caring subscore, sharing subscore).

Results

Characteristics of the sample

Females constituted 34.6% of the sample. 86.9% of students come from urban environments. The majority of students parents 54.2% of mothers and 60.2% of fathers are university educated, 15.9% of students parents are doctors. The students range in age from 19 to 28 year, with 95% being between 20 and 26 years of age. 42 students (39.3%) were from pre-clinical years (1 and 2), 18 (16.8%) from 3rd year and 47 (46.9%) from clinical years.

Table 1 Mean PPOS -Caring scores by medical school year

		Caring	F	P
pre-clinical	Mean	2.9444	30.95	.000
	N	42		
	Std. Deviation	0.36667		
3	Mean	2.9444		
	N	18		
	Std. Deviation	0.5145		
clinical	Mean	3.5366		
	N	47		
	Std. Deviation	0.34622		

The results showed that the students have low scores on Caring subscale (doctor-centered, mean of 4.57 or less).

Table 2 Post-Hoc Dunnett T3 analysis on Dependent Variable: Caring

(I) year of study	(J) year of study	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
pre-clinical	3	.00000	.13382	1.000
	4,5,6	-.59220*	.07584	.000
3	1 si 2	.00000	.13382	1.000
	4,5,6	-.59220*	.13136	.000
clinical	1 si 2	.59220*	.07584	.000
	3	.59220*	.13136	.000

We found significant difference in Caring sub-scores between the students in clinical years, comparing to students in pre-clinical years, the scores of Caring is higher for the students in clinical years.

Table 3 Mean PPOS -Sharing scores by medical school year

		Sharing	F	p
pre-clinical	Mean	3.231	9.001	.000
	N	38		
	Std. Deviation	0.37824		
3	Mean	3.2778		
	N	18		
	Std. Deviation	0.5393		
clinical	Mean	3.6596		
	N	47		
	Std. Deviation	0.55478		

The results also showed that the students have low scores on Sharing subscale (doctor-centered, mean of 4.57 or less).

Table 4 Post-Hoc Dunnett T3 analysis on Dependent Variable: Sharing

(I) year of study	(J) year of study	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
pre-clinical	3	-.04678	.14115	.982
	4,5,6	-.42858*	.10156	.000
3	1 si 2	.04678	.14115	.982
	4,5,6	-.38180*	.15069	.048
clinical	1 si 2	.42858*	.10156	.000
	3	.38180*	.15069	.048

We found significant difference in Sharing sub-scores between the students in clinical years, comparing to students in pre-clinical years, the scores of Sharing is higher for the students in clinical years.

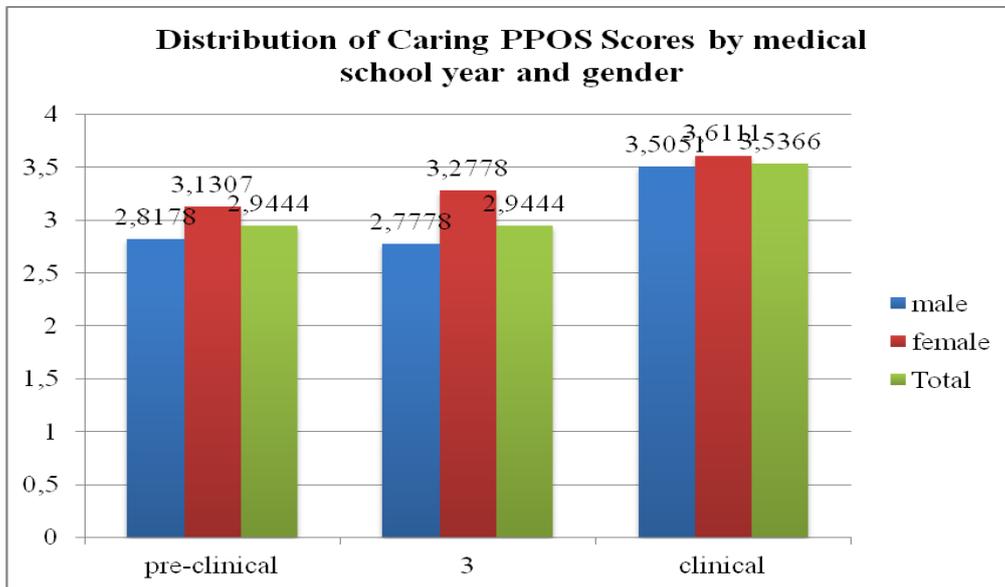


Fig. 1 Distribution of PPOS Caring Scores by medical school year and gender

Female students demonstrated significantly more patient-centered Caring scores than male students.

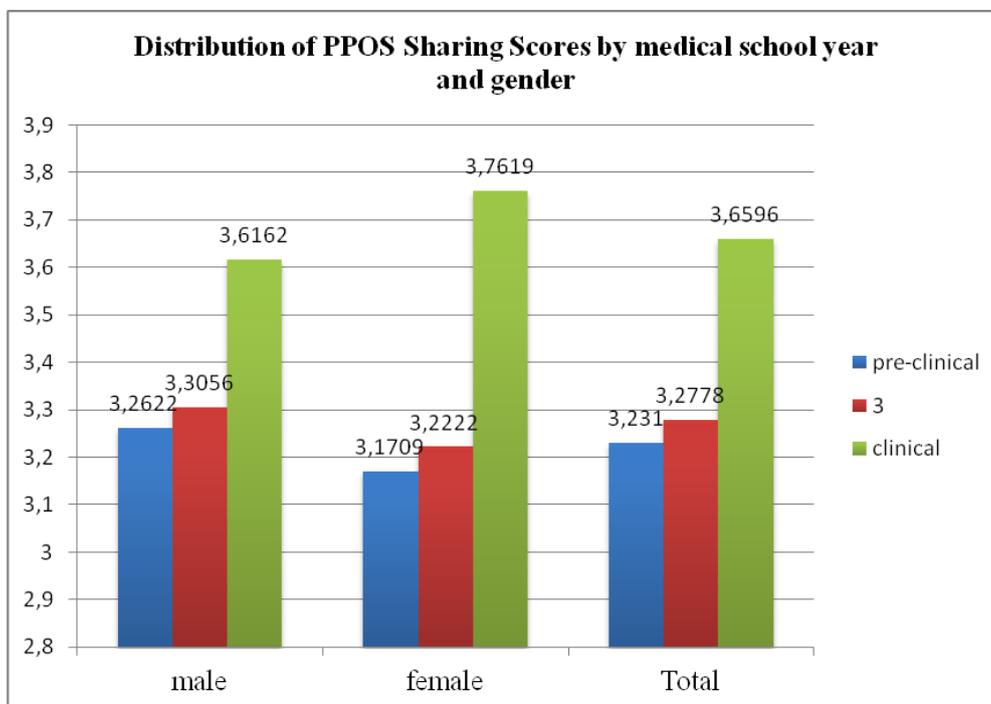


Fig. 2 Distribution of PPOS Sharing Scores by medical school year and gender

No gender differences were found in sharing scores.

Discussions:

If we compare the scores of our study with those of studies conducted in the USA (12), our results suggest that medical students in Romania achieve Caring and Sharing lower scores and the Romanian students are either less inclined to share information and knowledge with patients or they believe that patients do not expect them to. Attitudes towards patient-centredness represent complex interplays of social heritage, tradition, assigned meaning, symbolism and the other determinants of culture.

This study is, to our knowledge, the first report of a study on patient-centredness performed in a Romanian medical school. We believe that further studies on the patient-centred attitudes will contribute to curriculum development. In addition, our findings suggest that student experience in a clinical setting can significantly impact on these attitudes.

Conclusion:

Our data suggest that students in later years of medical school have attitudes that are less doctor centred or paternalistic compared to students in earlier years.

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