Defining professional responsibilities of simulated patients in medical education

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INTRODUCTION

• Simulated patients (SPs) are widely used in medical and health professional education. Initially, their contribution was ancillary however there are several drivers to their increased use and centrality including:
  • Ethical imperatives for simulation based learning and assessment
  • Patient safety initiatives
  • Patient empowerment
  • Increased numbers of medical students with reduced access to patients in clinical settings
  • At Imperial College London, SPs are extensively used in education and research
  • We recognised the need to improve several aspects of our SP programme as we moved into what is unchartered territory.
  • Reasons for clarity include:
    • SPs work with students in sensitive and sometimes highly charged situations and are often asked to make judgments about situations
    • A shared understanding for all stakeholders could minimise the possibility of conflicting agendas
    • Our SP bank is expanding rapidly
    • The varied and evolving contexts of education and research in which SPs are working
    • Bringing together significant numbers of culturally disparate individuals
    • Demonstrating a commitment to this important learning resource
    • Potential for attracting and retaining the most skilled SPs
  • Published and grey literature offered little insight into responsibilities of SPs
  • The project aimed to develop a set of expectations of all stakeholders in medical education involving SPs

METHODS

• Questionnaires and interviews were used in an iterative manner in our SP programme – SPs, students, tutors and administrators
• Convenience sampling was used for recruitment
• Participants completed semi-structured questionnaires exploring their experiences of working with SPs, what worked, what did not and the perceived responsibilities of SPs, students and tutors (Figure 1)
• Focus group interviews were conducted with stakeholders (except administrators)
• Interviews were conducted by a senior medical student trained in qualitative research methods (VA)
• Topic guides ensured key topics were covered in each interview (Figure 2) further exploring responses from questionnaires
• We used a grounded theory approach to analyse questionnaires and interviews to identify themes on ‘responsibilities’ in relation to working with SPs resulting in four distinct but overlapping documents

RESULTS

• Eighty-six questionnaires were collected from SPs (n=59); students (n=11); tutors (n=8); administrators (n=8)
• We separately volunteered (lay and unpaid) from professional (actors and paid) SPs
• Six interviews were conducted with population specific groups of between 5 and 6 participants
• We set out to establish a ‘code of conduct’ but changed the term to ‘professional responsibilities’ and finally expectations of all those involved in SP sessions
• The final document sets out guidelines as:
  • Expectations of professional SPs in teaching sessions
  • Expectations of volunteer SPs in teaching sessions
  • Expectations of students in SP teaching sessions
  • Expectations of tutors in SP teaching sessions
  • Expectations of programme directors working with SPs
  • Expectations of administrators working with SPs for teaching sessions
  • Feedback guidelines for tutors and professional SPs in teaching sessions
  • General guidelines for SP teaching sessions
• Selected segments of the document are reproduced in Boxes 1-2.
• The entire document is available on request by emailing debra.nestel@med.monash.edu.au

CONCLUSIONS & FURTHER WORK

• The most striking finding from questionnaire and interview data was the lack of shared understanding of the purpose of SP work by different stakeholders
• The documents outlining expectations have helped key faculty to understand the different expectations of stakeholders associated with SP education
• We believe that the guidelines will enable SPs to work more cohesively in our education and research programmes
• We are currently evaluating the document by asking all stakeholders to complete a semi-structured questionnaire

NOTE

The work was conducted when Debra Nestel was at Imperial College London with the co-authors. Diana Tabak is a postgraduate student at Imperial College London and has been involved in all phases of the project.

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