Can empathy be taught to medical students? Redesign and reevaluation of experiential empathy training curriculum

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Background
- A positive patient-provider relationship has been shown to improve patient outcomes and has a protective effect against physician burnout.
  - Patients who saw a physician categorized as having "high empathy" were 80% more likely to achieve A1c levels in the target range when compared to patients seen by the "low empathy" physicians.
- Empathy is documented to have a profound effect on burnout.

Methods
- 24 second year medical students in the CUSOM Rural Track were enrolled
- Administered the Jefferson Scale of Empathy, Student version (JSE-S)

Aging simulation:
- Students were asked to fill their pill box properly with simulated visual impairment.
  - Each day, asked to record their blood pressure, take all pills as prescribed, wear/wet an adult diaper and to wear visual and hearing impairment devices for 1 hr.
- Type 1 Diabetes simulation:
  - Students were given tools and instruction on how to calculate basal and short acting insulin based on carbohydrate consumption.
  - Instructed to inject "insulin" into an orange when needed and to test their blood sugar at meals and bedtime.
- After 1 week, 18 students returned for debrief and to engage with patient narratives and discussion.
- Participants were administered the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) and the JSE-S.

Materials
Students were randomly divided into two groups and given supplies as detailed in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aging</th>
<th>Type 1 diabetes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glucose</td>
<td>Glucose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing Strips</td>
<td>Testing Strips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancet device</td>
<td>Lancet device with refills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol wipes</td>
<td>Alcohol wipes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotton balls</td>
<td>Cotton balls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 gauge insulin needles (25 per student)</td>
<td>27 gauge insulin needles (25 per student)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharps Container</td>
<td>Sharps Container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Orange</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2 vials of sterile water labeled "Lispro" and "Glargine" | 2 vials of sterile water labeled "Lispro" and "Glargine"

Results
- Participants were more likely to have higher scores of empathy on the JSE-S following the intervention. \( t(15) = -3.179, p < 0.005 \).
- There was no relationship between overall JSE-S score and overall BRS score.
- There were no differences between men and women in how they responded to the intervention, overall scores of empathy or overall scores of resilience.

Conclusion
- There was a significant increase in empathy after the experiential learning intervention simulating the experiences of patients.
- Empathy can be taught! Using the right tool to measure changes in empathy is crucial to understanding how curriculum can have an impact on empathy.
- All students agreed that the curriculum was a valuable addition to their medical education.

Limitations
- Sample size was very small and non-representative of the full student body. Rural Track cohort members tend to lean more towards careers in primary care and may have higher baseline empathy.
- There was no control group, thus it is not possible to determine that the change in empathy was due to the intervention alone.

Future Directions
- Curriculum development should focus on cultivating empathy among medical students and trainees through experiential learning, patient narratives and reflective writing.
- Future simulations to be considered could include living with features of Substance Use Disorder, Schizophrenia, wheelchair use, ostomy care, etc.
- It is important to acknowledge the ways in which simulation curriculum can sometimes inadvertently promote ableism and cultivate a sense of pity for people living with chronic diagnoses instead of empathy and understanding.

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Adopt-a-Disease Empathy Training program
- Developed in 2014 as an intervention to increase student empathy those living with chronic conditions.
- Executed twice with no significant change in empathy among students, as measured by the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire.
- Students consistently provided anecdotal feedback regarding the value and importance of the training.

This project:
- Redesigned two conditions for execution of a week-long experience of living with Type 1 diabetes or with simulation of aging.
- Included opportunity for reflective writing and patient narrative exploration/discussion following the experience.
- Selected new tools for evaluation of impact

References