Can simulated patients authentically portray mental health scenarios for medical student education?

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Abstract
Introduction/background: Our institution uses a large cohort of volunteer simulated patients (SPs) to play roles in history taking and examination clinical skills lessons.Traditionally however, the mental health history taking lessons delivered to year 2 students recruited paid "expert SPs" who were working in mental health services to the roles. Aim/objectives: To ensure the program remained sustainable, we introduced and evaluated a training program to upskill selected volunteer SPs to play mental health scenarios. Discussion: A training workshop covering the portrayal of mental health issues and how to provide more complex and specific feedback to students was developed and run across 2 campuses with the participation of 38 SPs. The following year all of these SPs elected to participate in the mental health history taking lesson. The acceptability of this initiative for SPs and medical students was evaluated. A number of issues were encountered such as SPs finding it difficult to gauge how severely to portray symptoms. The following year we introduced new content to the training and again evaluated the program. Trained SPs reported increased confidence from the training and a greater sense of role satisfaction from playing the more challenging scenarios. Issues/questions for exploration or ideas for discussion: Are volunteer SPs with no particular experience in mental health able to authentically and safely portray patients with mental illness for the purposes of medical student history taking lessons?

Keywords
education?, scenarios, student, health, mental, portray, authentically, patients, simulated, can, medical

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INTRODUCTION:
At the University of Wollongong’s Graduate Medical Program, we use our large volunteer Simulated Patient (SP) cohort to teach history taking and examination in clinical skills lessons. Traditionally we have recruited paid “expert SPs” - generally mental health workers - to portray mental health scenarios. We introduced and evaluated a training program to upskill selected volunteer SPs to play mental health scenarios for an introductory mental health history taking lesson delivered to year 2 students. The training program covered the portrayal of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, borderline personality disorder and substance use disorder and how to provide more complex and specific feedback to students.

OBJECTIVES:
To determine if:
• students found the volunteer SP portrayals convincing and if there was a difference between their experiences with volunteer SPs and expert SPs
• students found the feedback they received from volunteer SPs as useful and relevant as they did when it was given by expert SPs
• volunteer SPs enjoyed the challenge and if they felt adequately prepared for the lesson
• volunteer SPs found it emotionally difficult to play their roles or difficult to step out of the role at the end of the day.

METHODS:
Student surveys after volunteer SP lessons and expert SP lessons one week later (n=70)
Volunteer SP surveys after the lesson (n=27)
Volunteer SP interviews (n=13)
Quantitative analysis was performed on SPSS using Mann-Whitney U test
Qualitative analysis was performed through manual thematic analysis of free text survey responses and interview transcripts

RESULTS:
The students felt that:
Volunteer SPs
• were authentic and convincing
• demonstrated good body language and acting ability
• provided useful feedback.

Expert SPs
• rated higher than volunteer SPs, but only marginally
• provided excellent, constructive feedback
• brought valuable knowledge and insight to the role from their experience as mental health workers
• provided an overall learning experience that was excellent, but also challenging and emotive.

CONCLUSIONS:
It is valid to train selected volunteer SPs to play mental health scenarios which were traditionally played by paid expert SPs. The medical students find these portrayals authentic and useful to their learning. Volunteer SPs enjoy the challenge of extending their role.

Expert SPs do however bring a wealth of knowledge, insight and constructive feedback which is highly valued by students and their role in medical student education cannot be completely replaced.

Student ratings of volunteer SPs vs expert SPs

![Chart showing student ratings of volunteer SPs vs expert SPs]

The volunteer SPs felt that:
• participating in the lesson was enjoyable, rewarding and interesting
• the training adequately prepared them for the roles
• they were able to give students relevant and useful feedback
• it was not emotionally difficult to play the roles
• the ‘de-roling’ techniques described in training were useful
• they liked the challenge of learning more specialised roles that were different, deeper, more detailed and ‘meatier’ than other roles.

All volunteer SPs were willing to participate again.