

LETTER

Response to "Medical students' attitudes toward communication skills learning: comparison between two groups with and without training" [Letter]

This article was published in the following Dove Press journal: Advances in Medical Education and Practice

Sophia von Widekind¹ Matthew Machin²

¹Imperial College School of Medicine, Charing Cross Hospital, London, UK; ²Department of Surgery and Cancer, Imperial College London, London, UK

Dear editor

We read with great interest the study by Ruiz Moral et al regarding medical students' attitudes toward communication skills (CS) teaching.¹

Of particular interest were the findings that "affective" attitude scores, which reflect feelings toward the delivery of CS teaching, were lower in fourth-year students than first-year students. The fourth-year students also scored lower for "positive attitudes" toward CS training.¹ The authors concluded that "students' attitudes toward CS could decline as a result of CS training".¹

Multivariate analysis demonstrated a statistically significant difference between the scores of first- and fourth-year students. However, the difference was as little as 2.0 for the affective dimension and 2.2 for positive attitudes. It is unclear whether this represents a tangible difference in attitudes between the two groups.

Furthermore, reported baseline characteristic data for the included populations were limited to gender, parent–doctor status, and education fees. Other important variables including, but not limited to, overall satisfaction with the medical course and prior CS teaching were not assessed.

Analysis was based on a cross-sectional design with unpaired comparisons performed. It is unclear whether fundamental baseline differences existed between the two populations which could explain the differing scores. Therefore, the study cannot validly conclude that attitudes decline due to previous exposure to CS as comparisons were made using two distinct populations with little adjustments for baseline characteristics. Although costly and timely, a prospective cohort study with paired comparisons of the same group of students in their first and fourth year would be enlightening and increase the validity of the conclusions.

The authors proposed that medical students' changes in attitude toward CS may be due to the pressure of performing in small groups and under the scrutiny of peers. This is supported by current evidence. Nilsen and Baerheim investigated the opinions of students on video-based feedback in a focus-group based qualitative study and commented on the importance of carefully designing CS programmes to reassure and support students (eg, effective debriefing).²

Correspondence: Sophia von Widekind Imperial College School of Medicine, Charing Cross Hospital, Margravine Rd, Hammersmith, London W6 8RP, UK Email scv14@ic.ac.uk

von Widekind and Machin

Dovepress

Nevertheless, the conclusion that a decline in attitude toward CS is directly due to negative training experiences does not account for the complex interplay of students' experiences throughout medical school. Students' clinical and life experiences between their first and fourth year will no doubt shape their attitudes toward CS in the curriculum and in clinical practice. Changes to students' attitudes and perceptions throughout medical school are well documented in the literature, and have been described as a decline in empathy and increased cynicism.³ Reasons for this change are undefined, but Woloshuck et al suggested "a ceiling of high attitude scores at entry, loss of idealism and the impact of the unintended curriculum".4

Attitudes toward CS are multifaceted and may be shaped by medical education and an individual's life experiences. CS are important in clinical practice and we should ensure that trainees have a positive attitude

toward CS courses. This study highlights an important issue in our approach to ensuring CS is delivered in an effective format.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this communication.

References

- Ruiz Moral R, García de Leonardo C, Caballero Martínez F, Monge Martín D. Medical students' attitudes toward communication skills learning: comparison between two groups with and without training. *Adv Med Educ Pract*. 2019;10:55–61.
- Nilsen S, Baerheim A. Feedback on video recorded consultations in medical teaching: why students loathe and love it—a focus-group based qualitative study. BMC Med Educ. 2005;5(1):28. doi:10.1186/1472-6920-5-28
- Hojat M, Mangione S, Nasca TJ, et al. An empirical study of decline in empathy in medical school. *Med Educ*. 2004;38(9):934–941. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2929.2004.01911.x
- Woloschuk W, Harasym PH, Temple W. Attitude change during medical school: a cohort study. *Med Educ*. 2004;38(5):522–534. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2929.2004.01820.x

Dove Medical Press encourages responsible, free and frank academic debate. The content of the Advances in Medical Education and Practice 'letters to the editor' section does not necessarily represent the views of Dove Medical Press, its officers, agents, employees, related entities or the Advances in Medical Education and Practice editors. While all reasonable steps have been taken to confirm the content of each letter, Dove Medical Press accepts no liability in respect of the content of any letter, nor is it responsible for the content and accuracy of any letter to the editor.

Advances in Medical Education and Practice

Publish your work in this journal

Advances in Medical Education and Practice is an international, peerreviewed, open access journal that aims to present and publish research on Medical Education covering medical, dental, nursing and allied health care professional education. The journal covers undergraduate education, postgraduate training and continuing medical education including emerging trends and innovative models linking education, research, and health care services. The manuscript management system is completely online and includes a very quick and fair peer-review system. Visit http://www.dovepress.com/testimonials.php to read real quotes from published authors.

 $\textbf{Submit your manuscript here:} \ \texttt{http://www.dovepress.com/advances-in-medical-education-and-practice-journal of the properties of the$

Dovepress