

Cross Cultural Communication to Help Physician Assistants Provide Unbiased Health Care

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Synopsis

Teaching cross cultural communication typically involves instruction in differences between groups.

As part of this course in cross cultural communication, six specific underserved population groups are introduced to students as a cultural experience. Additionally, instruction is provided to sensitize students to their personal biases and prejudices through videotaped mock interviews.

The combination of instruction and experience forms a paradigm for teaching cross cultural communication in a way that has personal and immediate impact on faculty members and students. The model, "Differences + Discomforts = Discoveries," inhibits factionalizing and promotes depth of knowledge about underserved groups as well as personal awareness of prejudicial feelings. As a result, students learn techniques to provide unbiased health care to these, and other, populations.

A commitment has been made by the faculty of the Physician Assistant Program at the University of Southern California School of Medicine to improve its graduates' sensitivity in cross cultural communication. As a result, graduates will be prepared better as individuals and as professionals to provide unbiased health care to people who are typically underrepresented and underserved in the health care system. We designed and implemented a 38-hour curriculum to meet the following goals:

1. Enrich the students' personal experience and knowledge regarding cultural and socioeconomic issues related to health care for specific population groups.
2. Using the model, "Differences + Discomforts = Discoveries," encourage students to reveal their own biases and prejudices regarding persons of different cultural and socioeconomic groups.
3. Improve students' abilities to cope with sensitive issues relating to cultural stereotyping and health care.

Three factors contributed to the faculty's perception of the need for such a course of instruction. They saw the course as a natural complement to the Health Careers Opportunity Program (HCOP)

within the Physician Assistant Program. They believed that students who lacked sensitivity or the ability to communicate, or both, would be handicapped significantly in their attempts to take an accurate history or win the confidence and compliance of the very diverse patient population at the program's primary teaching hospital, Los Angeles County Hospital. Finally, several racially insensitive exchanges between students hastened the decision to implement the course earlier than anticipated.

The HCOP component of the program played an important role in the development of the course. One of the key HCOP goals has been to recruit students from populations that are medically underserved. In the Los Angeles area that has meant recruits from Central American and Southeast Asian countries in addition to the African American and Mexican American populations. While it is generally recognized that the Asian and Latino populations are not homogeneous, there are, nevertheless, particular health needs of immigrants from these two regions that are not being met, such as post traumatic stress from war and, in some cases, imprisonment and torture. The HCOP agenda also includes recruiting students from medically underserved populations who are interested in returning to those communities to practice.

Description of the Course

The Physician Assistant Program at the University of Southern California School of Medicine is housed within the Department of Family Medicine. The program admits 36 students annually. There are 10 faculty members, all of whom are physician assistants, except for the medical director and the program evaluator. The course in cross cultural communication begins in the first semester and continues throughout the 2 years of program instruction.

We devised a learning paradigm that would teach about differences and discomforts. Teaching about differences between groups was viewed as the simpler task. In fact, the choice to focus on differences between groups as the principal learning objective in multicultural or cross cultural education was considered to be the road most often travelled. The more difficult task would be figuring a way to teach how to create, acknowledge, and use self-awareness of personal discomfort as a tool for promoting sensitive cross cultural communication.

The cross cultural communications course that resulted is composed of one introductory lecture, one large group introductory activity, and six learning modules. Each module focuses on one of six underserved population groups that are widely represented in the Los Angeles area—the homeless, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Pacific Islanders, homosexual men and women, and Native Americans.

Each module is composed of three specific structured activities—a lecture, a panel discussion, and a videotaped workshop. The lecture and discussion introduces students to the cultural beliefs and practices of a given group, that is, the differences. For example, the Hispanic module takes place over 2 days. On the first day, there is a lecture on health status and social and economic issues that affect Hispanic Americans. On the second day, a panel of Hispanic people, some of whom may be health care practitioners and some of whom may be ordinary citizens, discuss their particular involvement in the issues affecting their community or ethnic group. The size of the panel often varies. Students are encouraged to ask questions and engage in discussion with the panelists and with each other.

Later in the term, a workshop of eight students is led by a faculty member trained in cross-cultural communication techniques. In the workshops, students are paired off and directed to interview each other. Students are given a choice of asking their

own questions or selecting from a set of prepared questions. Questions are intended to elicit strong responses, that is, the discomforts. Students take turns interviewing each other in 2-minute segments. Questions should pertain to the cultural or ethnic group covered in a recent panel. Each student is allowed to be in the hot seat two ways—as interviewee and interviewer. The 2-minute interviews are videotaped. The videotapes are immediately reviewed and critiqued by the group and instructor. Students are instructed to keep the material confidential. This triple activity format of lectures, panels, and videotaped workshops is repeated for each of the target population groups. Each student gets to be videotaped at least three times.

The six modules centered on the target groups are the heart of the course. A reading list for each module includes articles from the secular press as well as from professional journals.

A preliminary set of introductory activities takes place in the early fall during the first week that the students begin the Physician Assistant Program. This scaled-down lecture-panel-workshop series introduces the students to each other and anticipates the subsequent set of six lecture-panel-workshops that take place over the next 18 months.

This introductory series in miniature takes place on what is designated as “Cross-Cultural Day.” It is preceded by the initial course lecture that defines ethnocentricity, cultural diversity, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural factors that may play a role in obtaining a health history. The lecture is followed by a large group activity in which students introduce themselves to the group at large and say something about themselves, their parents, and a significant influence on their lives.

This lengthy but revealing activity sets the precedent for the mock interviews that follow later in the course. These introductions are then followed by a second exercise that also foreshadows the interactive component of the course. Students are assigned to small groups. Half the groups work while the other half observe. The working groups are asked to reach consensus by rewriting a controversial statement, such as, “abortion is murder by another name.” As one group works on the task, another group observes how they communicate with each other. In the followup period, the observing groups describe and critique the working groups. Issues of leadership, cooperativeness, and individual behavior are introduced as examples of differences among people. The day is capped with a potluck meal of familiar or native dishes prepared by students and faculty members.

A final exercise is assigned near the end of the second year, after the students have completed the last of nine month-long clinical rotations. Each student is required to conduct and report on his or her own cross cultural interaction. They have a choice of conducting a structured interview or doing volunteer community work to be coordinated with the instructors. A brief report is written and submitted for review.

Grading is based upon attendance, participation, and completion of the final exercise.

Discussion

The course is in the third year of its pilot phase. The 1992 class will receive the fully developed course. The faculty has considered such a course as recently as 1988. National and local concerns, such as the increasing homeless population and the dilemma of large numbers of immigrants fleeing to Los Angeles from war-torn Central American countries hastened the course's development. Faculty members agreed that these population groups were not represented adequately in the program's curriculum. It was believed that the need to work effectively with these and other underserved populations would increase before it diminished. The impetus to develop and implement the course formally, however, was provided by an incident within the program with strong racial overtones.

An African American student was singled out for harassment by an unknown assailant, assumed to be a class member. A note with a racial slur was dropped in this student's locker following months of slow but steady factionalizing between minority and some Anglo students. The factions had voiced their differences by quips made in the classroom and hallways or by complaints to certain faculty members. Among the complaints made by the faction of Anglo students was that HCOP favored disadvantaged students who were academically at risk.

In alarm, the faculty added a question to the

admissions interview that attempted to uncover feelings of resentment towards minority recruitment programs. The question was, "What does the phrase affirmative action mean to you?" The interview already contained a scenario addressing racial intolerance that was viewed as being too obvious and, as a result, was dropped.

Racial prejudice is only one of the issues to be addressed in dealing with cross cultural communication. Bigotry comes in many forms, too many to enumerate. This course represents an attempt to deal with the issues of bias, prejudice, fear, and insensitivity to others in a positive manner. It is intended that the course have an impact on the individual student as well as the group. The model, "Differences + Discomforts = Discoveries," teaches about others and about one's self. The lectures introduce information and ideas pertaining to the specific target populations that the students are sure to encounter as students and practitioners in southern California. The panels give students a chance to speak to the representatives of those populations. The workshops turn the focus to the students as individuals. On camera before their peers, students are allowed to investigate their own feelings of prejudice and bias that often arise when they perceive differences between themselves and others. As part of the critique, they find support and encouragement to use their sensitivity to discomfort as a cue that they are perceiving a difference and to inquire further rather than seek safety in the harbor of fear and prejudice.

We believe that the course also will serve an important administrative function as a lens that can foresee factionalizing among students within a class. In such a case the course can provide a forum in which to confront the issues that have polarized the students. True-to-life incidents that have occurred once can happen again. If they do, we believe the cross cultural communication course is structured so that discovery will prevail instead of acrimony.