



Impact of Communication Skills Training in Postgraduate Medical Education

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ABSTRACT

Background: Effective communication is a key feature of optimal doctor-patient relationship. As the postgraduate curriculum lacks standardized teaching and assessment, this study aimed to assess effectiveness of training program on communication skills of postgraduate medical students.

Materials and methods: A prospective, interventional study was conducted among first year postgraduate medical students from different clinical specialty. Training program included introduction to principles of communication with basics of doctor-patient relationship, administering informed consent, breaking bad news and counselling patients with HIV/cancer. Pre and post-test skill assessment by Faculty and postgraduate (PG) self-rating was carried out using KEECC-A Assessment tool for seven core communication competencies. Perception of students on training program was collected via feedback questionnaire.

Results: Forty-three postgraduate medical students participated. Statistically significant increase in communication skills scores was observed post training with mean post-test assessment scores of 24.26 ± 2.94 , $p < 0.001$ (rating by faculty), 25.19 ± 3.76 , $p < 0.001$ (PG self-rating) and high degree of internal consistency was found. Students perceived the training program as valuable and highlighted its importance as a part of curriculum.

Conclusion: Training program significantly enhanced communication skills of postgraduate medical students. Integration of standardized teaching and assessment of communication skills is essential for better healthcare practice and optimal doctor-patient relationship.

Key words: Communication skills, assessment, Kalamazoo, postgraduate medical education

INTRODUCTION

Communication skills is one of the core competencies of postgraduate medical education. Often, it remains as a part of hidden curriculum. Postgraduate students should demonstrate the ability to communicate effectively with patients, families, colleagues and community. Effective communication is a key component essential in establishing optimal doctor-patient relationship which results in increased patient satisfaction, compliance to treat-

ment, and better outcome of a disease.^{1,2} Communication skill training for postgraduate students has significantly gained importance since many years^{3,4} Many studies addressed the need for teaching of communication skills in postgraduate medical education earlier in the 19th century itself.^{5,6,7} The Kalamazoo consensus statement describes the strategy for teaching and assessing effective physician-patient communication which includes seven core essential elements.^{8,9} Studies have shown Kalamazoo Essential

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Elements Communication Checklist - Adapted (KEECCA) assessment tool which can be used by multi rater of different specialties and is found to be valid and reliable.¹⁰ In a study conducted by Voichita et al, it was found that training enhanced communication skills of residents.¹¹ Similarly, Hoffman reported communication skills training is essential for physician trainee when handling cancer cases.¹² Lack of communication plays an important role in problems related to the current trend of doctor-patient relationship with increasing litigations and violence against doctors.¹³ As there is no standardized teaching and assessment of communication skills for postgraduate medical students in Indian medical schools, this study aimed to assess the effectiveness of a training program on the communication skills of postgraduate students and to assess the perceptions of postgraduate students towards training program.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A prospective, interventional study was conducted among first year postgraduate students of different clinical specialty at a private medical college in Bengaluru, South India from June-August 2021. A total of forty-three students participated in the study, selected by convenience sampling method after obtaining informed consent and Institutional Ethical Committee clearance.

Communication skills training program was conducted in 4 sessions over a period of four days with each session lasting for 1.5 hours. The training module included introduction to principles of communication skills with basics of doctor-patient relationship, administering informed consent, breaking of bad news and counselling patients with HIV/Cancer emphasizing different levels of communication, applying the World Health Organization (WHO) principles^{1,2} and Kalamazoo consensus statement model for effective communication. The teaching learning

methodologies included lectures, small group discussion, role play, videos, quiz, games etc.

Pre and post-test assessment of communication skills of postgraduate students was carried out using the Kalamazoo Essential elements communication checklist Adapted (KEECC-A) assessment tool for seven core communication competencies (builds a relationship, opens the discussion, gathers information, understands the patient’s perspective, shares information, reaches agreement, provides closure) on a standardized patient encounter and it was rated by faculty and postgraduate self-rating using a 5-point Likert scale (1-Poor to 5-Excellent).

Perceptions of students towards training program was assessed by using a validated feedback questionnaire rated using a 5-point Likert scale.

Statistical Analysis: Data was analyzed using SPSS 22.0 software. Descriptive and inferential statistical analysis was carried out. Paired t-test was used to assess the difference in assessment scores before and after training. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess internal consistency. Significance was assessed at 5 % level of significance.

RESULTS

A total of 43 postgraduate students from different clinical specialty participated. Post-test assessment showed statistically significant improvement in mean total scores of 25.19±3.76 for PG self -rating and 24.26±2.94 rating by faculty with p value of <0.001.(Table 1)

Table 1: Comparison of mean total assessment scores before and after intervention by paired t-test

Assessment	Pretest	Posttest	P value
PG Self-rating	18.49±3.69	25.19±3.76	<0.001**
Faculty-rating	16.42±3.37	24.26±2.94	<0.001**

**Highly significant

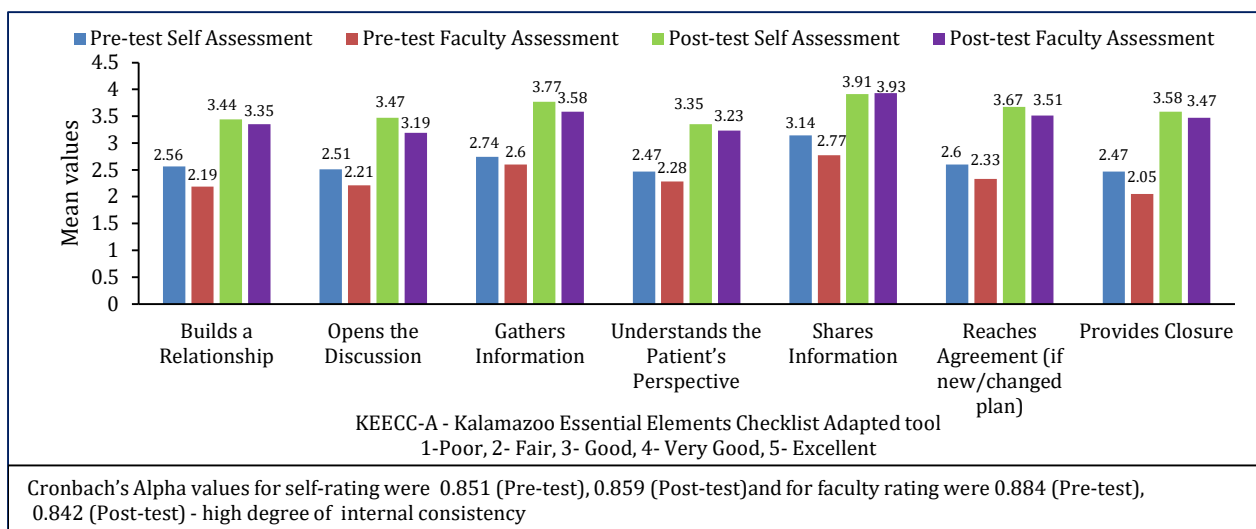


Figure 1: Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Assessment by Faculty rating and PG Self-rating using KEECC-A Tool for all the seven core communication competencies

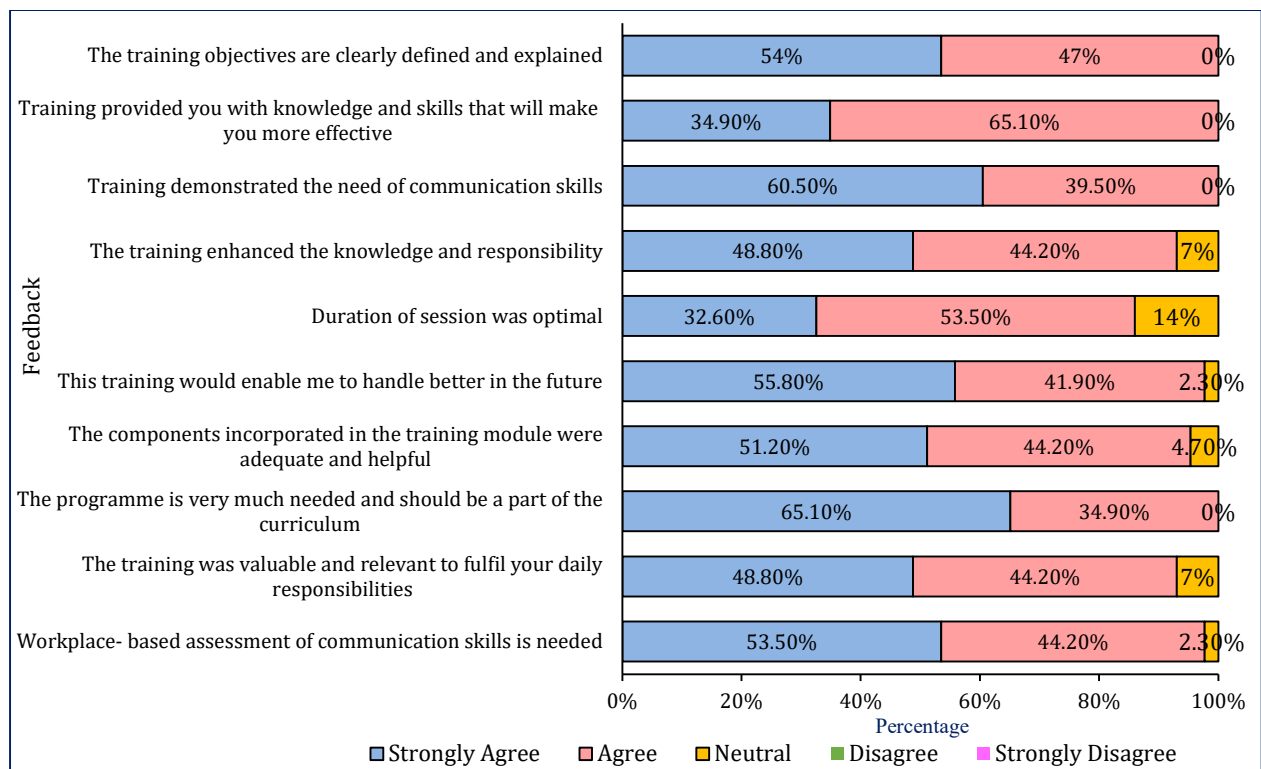


Figure 2: Perceptions of students on Communication training program

Performance of postgraduate students improved post training for all the seven core communication competencies in KEECC-A assessment tool, and score was high especially for skills related to building relationship, opening the discussion, reaches agreement/treatment plan, summarizing and closure of interview. Rating carried out by faculty and PG self-rating was found to have high degree of internal consistency with significant Cronbach's alpha value of > 0.8. (Fig 1).

As per the feedback obtained, the students strongly agreed that the course was valuable as a part of curriculum (65.10%) and work-based assessment (53.50%) which would enable them to handle patient care better in future (55.80%) (Fig 2).

DISCUSSION

Effective communication is important in establishing optimal doctor-patient relationship for better health care outcome.¹⁴ Poor communication leads to patient dissatisfaction, non-compliance to treatment and inaccurate diagnosis.^{15,16} National medical commission (NMC) has addressed the importance of communication skills for the undergraduate students and introduced the Attitude, Ethics, Communication (AETCOM) module in the new MBBS competency based medical education (CBME) curriculum. However, there is lack of similar structural training and assessment in postgraduate medical education though communication skills have been considered as one of the core competencies.^{17,18} Evidences from Literature review highlight the importance of teaching and assessment of communication skills in post-

graduate medical settings.¹⁹⁻²³ Our study involved postgraduate students from different clinical specialty. The post-test assessment scores of communication skills of postgraduate students had significantly improved post training indicating increased awareness and need for communication skills training program. In a study conducted by Bhagat et al, it was reported that introduction of communication skill module increased awareness of communication.²⁴

The assessment of postgraduate students by PG self-rating and rating by faculty using KEECC-A assessment tool was found to have high inter-rater reliability with significant Cronbach's alpha value of >0.8 suggestive of valid and reliable assessment tool which can be used by multiple rater of different specialty. Similar finding was reported in a study conducted by Joyce et al.⁴ Key elements of assessment of all the seven core communication competencies in clinical encounter showed significant improvement in skills post training. It was found that the students improved their skills in building rapport, opening of discussion, planning treatment, summarizing and closure of interview which clearly shows students inculcated necessary communication skills essential for establishing a better relationship with the patient for improved healthcare outcome. Patients with cancer seek psychosocial support. Communication skill is essential in promoting care of patients with cancer.²⁵ Healthcare professionals (HCPs) involved in cancer care require adequate training in communication skill to improve HCP wellbeing, patient health status and patient satisfaction.²⁶ The training module covered core topics pertaining to the daily practices such as understanding principles of communi-

cation skills, doctor-patient relationship, breaking of bad news, administering informed consent, counseling of patients with HIV/cancer and with shorter training period consistent with other studies.^{27,28} Similar to the finding from other studies, the students perceived the training program as valuable and highlighted its relevance as a part of curriculum and work-based assessment for a better health care practice. The integration of work-based assessment of communication skills improves clinical practice and patient care.²⁹⁻³¹

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Due to Covid pandemic, the study involved only first year postgraduate medical students from different clinical specialty. Inclusion of other postgraduate students could have fetched better understanding on their communication skills. We hope the study findings will guide educators and policy makers in planning a curricular design, implementing the communication skill training program to improve the communication skills of postgraduate medical students towards patient-centered approach.

CONCLUSION

Communication training program significantly improved the communication skills of postgraduate medical students towards patient-centered approach, and thereby establishes a better doctor-patient relationship. Feedback from students suggested that the training was very valuable, components incorporated were adequate and helpful to handle patient care better in future and indicated its need as a part of curriculum and workplace-based assessment. Integration of standardized teaching and assessment of communication skills in postgraduate curriculum is essential for optimal doctor-patient relationship and better health care outcome.

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