

Telling the truth: medical students' progress with an ethical skill

Authors

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Background:

Truth-telling is a complex skill, requiring multiple abilities of communication, understanding, and empathy.

Summary of work

We assessed the effects of a teaching intervention on students' ethical attitudes towards truth-telling and on their self-reported competence and comfort in breaking bad news.

Two cohorts of medical students (n 225) participated in a standardized patient (SP)-based seminar integrating ethical and communication skills into teaching the delivery of bad news. They answered a questionnaire one week before the teaching intervention, one month later, and 2 years later during clerkship.

Summary of results:

Ethical attitudes towards breaking bad news remained stable across time. In general, students self-assessed as more competent and more comfortable after the teaching intervention with SP. A closer analysis revealed that students that self-reported as not competent (mean 1.72) increased significantly their feeling of competence after having been trained (2.50). Students who self-reported as competent (mean 4.14) before the intervention changed their meaning after the intervention and declared being in fact less competent than previously thought (2.43)

Conclusions:

A SP-based seminar helped to avoid the decrease of ethical attitudes observed in other studies and increased competence and comfort in breaking bad news.

Take-home message

Experiential training approach seems to benefit medical students in maintaining ethical skills and developing competence and awareness in delivering bad news.