

Communication Skills of Practicing Pharmacists and Pharmacy Students

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Abstract: Communication skills are of utmost importance to both students and practicing pharmacists. In order to become successful pharmacists, one needs to possess excellent communication skills to serve the clients. This study examined the perception of 1st year pharmacy students who are currently enrolled in a course entitled Communication Skills for Pharmacy. A sample of 21 students was identified through purposive sampling. They were examined on a) the importance of communication skills in ESP and b) their perceived abilities on the selected communication skills. In addition, 21 practicing pharmacists were interviewed through interview protocols regarding similar issues. The pharmacy students were also involved in a focus group interview technique to gain insights into their communication skills. The preliminary findings showed that whilst the majority of students rated most communication skills as very important, the results also indicated that they perceived having both moderate and lesser abilities in executing such skills. A comparison with practicing pharmacists indicated that the latter have greater abilities to practice communication skills in their daily professional lives. The latter also highlighted that good communication skills has enabled them to (a) prescribe drugs aptly (b) empathize with the clients frame of mind (c) sustain networking with their clients. The findings have practical and educational implications in practicum, curriculum and career development of pharmacists.

Keywords: communication skill; practicing pharmacist; pharmacy student

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1. INTRODUCTION

A graduate's ability to communicate effectively can greatly affect their career development in the future workplace (Ena et al., 2010). Communication in the area of health is consistently a central concern for policy makers, economists, and academics (Schulz, 2008). Similarly, communication skills remain an important factor in the field of pharmacy. Undoubtedly, Tindall et al. (1994) have explained this succinctly by highlighting the needs for communication skills in pharmacy such as establishing ongoing relationship between the pharmacists and patients, providing ways to ensure patient's information and ultimately, to improve the healthcare of the patient. These three reasons were to state the importance of communication skills in pharmacy by indicating that without communication skills, pharmacists are unable to achieve the goals of a pharmacist as a health provider to the patients or customers due to inability of pharmacists to understand patients and their health problems, gain the patient's trust as well and engage patients to open up in their conversations.

To further illustrate the idea of Tindall et al (1994), good communication skills are stressed upon pharmacists as it determines the grounds for trust in the pharmacist-patient relationship (McDonough & Bennett, 2006). As quoted by McDonough and Bennett (2006, p.2), "...This relationship is built on the foundation of trust and open exchange of information; it is a collaborative relationship. Pharmacy students should understand the importance of this relationship...establishes a covenant between pharmacist and patient..."

Besides that, Hargie et al. (2000, p.63) have stated that the quality of communication between pharmacists and patient is essential in creating effective health care. In their research paper entitled *Pharmacists' Evaluation of Key Communication Skills in Practice*; they have quoted Cipolle by saying "Care means communication and Quality care means quality communication".

A study also showed that communication skills also showed to be one of the most important criterions in selecting fresh intake for pharmacy students in many countries especially in the United States (Jones et. al., 2000a, p68). They also pointed out that communication skills are needed in becoming a successful pharmacist. As an example, in United States of America, in the latest version of PCAT (Pharmacy College Admission Test), communication skills are assessed by reading comprehension as well as verbal abilities (Jones et al. 2000b, p.68).

Hence, this research proposes that communication skills are indeed one of the most important and compulsory components in ensuring a good career in pharmacy. However, communication skills are not exclusively set for patients-pharmacists relationship only. Even, nurse reports of physicians who listened effectively and used clear, humorous, immediate, and empathic messages were strongly related to nurses' satisfaction in several contexts. Physicians' use of empathic messages emerged as a significant predictor of nurses' satisfaction with communication, relationships, and collaborative medical practices (Melissa et al., 2009). Physician humour and clarity were significant predictors of nurses' job satisfaction. As a pharmacist, they are also involved in communicating with their colleagues or other doctors, physicians, nurses, and also other staff. This research is also set out to look at the communication skills needed in order for pharmacists to communicate with their co-workers, boss, and various members of the health and non-health groups. Therefore, the objectives of the study were to examine the perceptions of students and pharmacists about communication skills and determine whether there are significant differences between the rating of pharmacists and pharmacy students.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative methods

were executed by giving out questionnaires using the likert's scale. Thus, the Practicing Pharmacists Communication Survey (PPCS) questionnaires were administered to 30 second-year pharmacy students and 30 pharmacists from varied backgrounds. The qualitative method employs methods such as personal face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions. The personal face-to-face interviews were recorded by either audio or video, and later transcribed word-per-word on paper. Interviews were conducted in the vicinity of the pharmacist's workplace and during their working hours around 10-20 minutes.

However, for the use of focus group discussions were employed for pharmacy students. These students were divided into 4-5 people per group and were given a maximum of 40 minutes to discuss the importance of communication skills and suggestions for the betterment of this research.

2.1 Sample

A total of 30 practicing pharmacists were randomly selected from the list of Registered Pharmacists in Malaysia. In the sample, the practicing pharmacists are aged between 22-49 years old. 43% of the respondents are in their 20s, 17% percent are in their 30s and only 10% belong in their 40s. The practicing pharmacists vary in their profession: clinical and retail pharmacists. 29% of the practicing pharmacists received their degree overseas from various countries such as Ireland, England and Australia whilst the remaining 71% was awarded their Bachelors locally.

For the student sample, 30 pharmacy students were randomly selected from two universities in Klang Valley namely Universiti Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. All of them belong in the second year of their pharmacy course and aged between 20-23 years old.

2.2 Instrument

The instrument used in this study comprises of six constructs. These constructs were designed based on the pharmaceutical literature Communication Skills in Pharmacy Practice 3rd. Edition by Tindall et al. (1994). The six main themes of communication highlighted in this study are such as (a) Knowledge which is about the perception of formal education and communication skills in general (b) Ethics (c) Verbal Language (d) Body Language (e) Assertiveness and (f) Empathy. Each of these constructs has six questions pertaining to the main theme. Thus, a total of 36 questions were asked in the Practicing Pharmacists Communication.

2.3 Questionnaire Survey (PPCS)

Two separate sets of questionnaires were distributed to both pharmacists and pharmacy students. Even though the phrasing for both sets are slightly different, the meaning itself has been preserved and would not result into any confusion. In addition, the questionnaire for pharmacy students had separate sections in whereby they are free to express any suggestions or opinions related to communication skills in pharmacy.

The questionnaires were distributed to the pharmacy students after their focus group discussion and to the pharmacists after ending their individual interviews. The validity of the questionnaire items were verified by experts in Communication Skills and the Test-Retest Reliability with Alpha Cronbach's value of 0.80. The questionnaire was a pilot test for both pharmacists and pharmacy students. The pilot test was conducted to gauge the respondents' understanding of the questionnaire.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as min, standard deviation, mod and median using the SPSS version 12. The differences between both groups (pharmacists and pharmacy

students) were determined using the T- Test. On the other hand, the qualitative data were discussed according to arising themes and processed through. Interview narratives were transcribed and listened to accordingly in order to distinguish the various importance and arising themes as described by the interviewees.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows that students studying pharmacy rated all components of communication skills as more of higher importance compared to the practicing pharmacists. However, both groups equally agreed that knowledge and ethics should be of utmost importance. Furthermore, both groups rated body language as of lower importance.

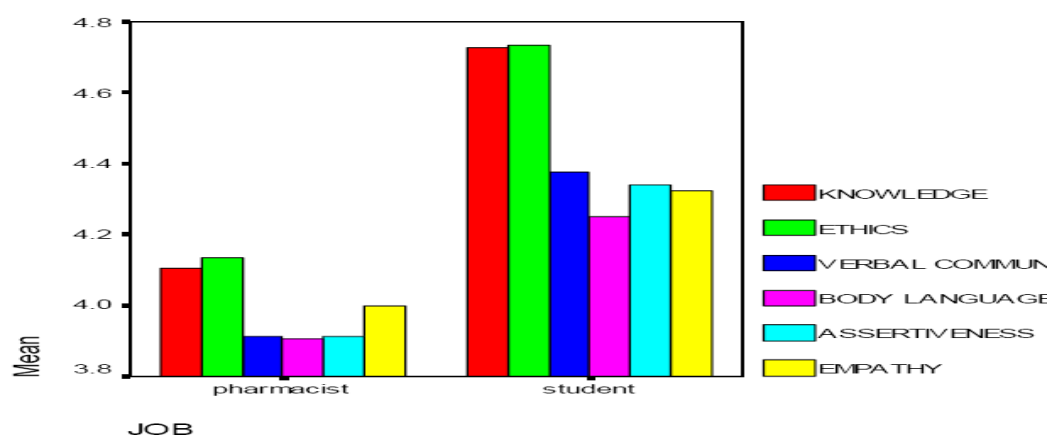


Figure 1: Differences in Mean (Pharmacy Students vs. Pharmacists)

Table 1 describes the responses of both pharmacists and students to communication skills according to the six constructs. The t-test was used to find out whether significant differences in means exist between the two groups of respondents. Table 1 show that the significant difference exists between pharmacists and students in each of the domains. The table implies that generally students rated the six constructs higher than pharmacists. The t-values are much lesser than the Alpha level set at 0.5. Thus, this means that the differences are significant. In this study, all of the respondents rated the PPCS survey as important (ranging from 3.9 – 4.7). In the qualitative data through means of interviews and focus group discussions, there are major themes emerging. The two main themes gathered are (a) Importance of Knowing the Lingua Franca of Patients and (b) The Difficulties in Communication Faced by Pharmacists. Most interviewees believe that it is essential for people to know and also learn the Lingua Franca of the patients. For an example, Respondent 1 said that “It is when you communicate with the patient, especially when the patient does not understand what we are talking. For example, let us say we have a foreigner or a Chinese old lady who can not understand in English or Malay.

“We have to tell them as simple as they can understand because if we explain to them completely they would not understand. So we just told them as simple as possible” Another respondent mentioned that “I think the most difficult communication skill to be carried out is the language barrier...because when we encounter a patient who they prefer to use their dialect, for example in Cantonese, but not all Chinese pharmacist know how to speak in Cantonese, so they could be one of the barrier. Maybe some India patients they do not understand in Malay or Chinese but they only understand Tamil.” Thus, it remains a vital issue for pharmacists to enhance their knowledge of other languages to overcome the language barrier that might occur in the job. For another pharmacist, he argues that knowing one or two major languages will not suffice in the daily life of a pharmacist, as pharmacists are most likely to encounter more people with different backgrounds and many nationalities such as Bangladeshis, Koreans,

Indonesians to name a few. Thus, he suggested for pharmacists to take initiatives to learn languages in order to help them in prescribing medicine. Students in one of the focus group also mentioned that learning one or two more new languages are essential in making communication better as well as building better rapport with patients. Both students and pharmacist felt that there are certain difficulties faced in communication. In fact, McDonough & Doucette (2003) emphasized the use of personal selling skills to promote pharmacy services in certain practice settings. Students need to be exposed to counseling opportunities with patients who are self-treating a particular condition or symptom. This provides a great “teaching moment” for pharmacy preceptors because nonprescription drug/product consults provide a unique opportunity for the student to triage a patient.

Table 1: Comparison between Pharmacists and Pharmacy Students in the Ratings of Construct

Group Statistics					t-Test for Equality of Means		
Construct	Job	N	Mean	Std Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed) *sig at Alpha .05
a) Knowledge	Pharmacist	30	4.1056	1.22199	-2.671	58	.010
	Student	30	4.7278	.36746	-2.671	34.202	.012
b) Ethics	Pharmacist	30	4.1333	1.10242	-2.881	58	.006
	Student	30	4.7333	.29230	-2.881	33.057	.007
c) Verbal	Pharmacist	30	3.9111	1.09223	-2.216	58	.031
	Student	30	4.3778	.37122	-2.216	35.611	.033
d)Body Language	Pharmacist	30	3.9056	1.08868	-1.568	58	.122
	Student	30	4.2500	.51183	-1.568	41.223	.124
e) Assertiveness	Pharmacist	30	3.9111	1.01684	-2.121	58	.038
	Student	30	4.3389	.43215	-2.121	39.145	.040
f) Empathy	Pharmacist	30	4.0000	.94989	-1.734	58	.088
	Student	30	4.3222	.36602	-1.734	37.426	.091

A few items explored in detailed are (a) Difficulties in Projecting Body Language and (b) Difficulty in Managing Tough Customers or Patients. A female pharmacist in her 30s responded that it is hard to control body language as compared to verbal language. She explained that it is much easier to “Control what you say, but not what you do- as you’re bound to project something subconsciously”. About 90% of the students in the focus group discussion also found that they are having a hard time practicing good body language skills. One of the reasons proposed by a respondent was because that it was a natural habit for the person whilst having conversation. Some stated that it was their habit, or just merely were not sure of what should be projected through their body language. Hence, they mentioned that formal education should implemented for them to study the projection of body language or by having formal training where they can attend workshops or deal with patients themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

Both groups think that communication skills are important in their general life as a pharmacist. Thus, this paper shows that both pharmacists and students alike agree on the importance of communication skills to not only benefit the lives of the patients as a main agenda, but also the members in their workplace as a whole. Significant differences between the pharmacists and pharmacy students were recorded and proved to be valid according to the Crombach value of lesser than 0.5. The importance attached to communications skills were rated high by both groups although was rated higher by the students studying pharmacy.

This study implies that curriculum and training for students to become professional practicing pharmacists need to be regularly upgraded and revised. Special attention should be given to specific skills that were rated lower. A great deal of reflection too needs to be given to the reasons why practicing and experienced pharmacists interestingly rated the importance of communication skills lower.

Further work need to be conducted to verify these findings. Training workshops and refresher courses should also be conducted to maintain and enhance the motivation of practicing pharmacists to excel in their jobs. As perceptions, feelings and attitude affect productivity; professional trainings help to counteract any weaknesses in the professional practice. In addition, further studies should be of a more ethnographic involving participant observation to examine the issues deeply since the present study has limitations with regards sample size and scope. An action research oriented approach can also be planned to verify the exploratory findings from this present study. It is also recommended that customer satisfaction be included as an important variable to be considered.

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