Disability: Treating a Taboo with Training

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When I first started as an SP almost two years ago I was very skeptical about the intent of the program and what being part of it actually entailed. Now, in hindsight, I know that I had no reason to be skeptical. Being an SP has been a tremendous experience for me and the necessity of the program cannot be over stated. The disconnect between people with disabilities, like myself, and medical professionals is a chronic problem and, from my perspective, it seems to be growing worse over time.

It has been incredibly refreshing to be associated with a program that seeks to teach students proper ways to interact with people with disabilities and show a real interest in patient care. I commend Villanova University for started this program and putting tremendous effort into making it a success.

One day, perhaps, with the increase in SP programs and offerings of other educational opportunities similar to those SP Programs provide, the disconnect between physicians and patients with disabilities will be gone.

The following piece reflects just a sample of the good work that has been done at Villanova University. The project, which won the 2012 ASPE Research and Project Award, in addition to a Poster award at the INACSL conference in June 2014, can be found at the end of my reflective piece. I hope this work inspires you, as SP Educators, to spread this type of programming by reading about the impact that the SP program has had on my life, the lives of my fellow SP’s and the students we have touched.

Disability: It’s still a very taboo term and can be confusing. One University created a program which seeks to eliminate that confusion and bring the issue of disability to the forefront of their student’s entry into the medical field. The SP program at Villanova University was established three years ago as a collaborative effort of members of the Delaware Valley Polio Survivors (DVSPA) and the Villanova College of Nursing students. The program hires actual patients with disabilities for scenarios with nursing students who must diagnose a particular medical concern (i.e., pneumonia, high blood pressure, diabetes) as well as determine how or if their patient’s disability diagnosis may affect their ability to treat them.

Many of us SPs associated with the program came into it with little or no idea what to expect. SP Carol Ferguson simply said, “Why not?” when presented with the opportunity to participate.
in the program. “From moment one, it has been an inspirational experience,” Ferguson shared afterward. “The staff is committed to their students getting ‘real world’ experience while still under instructors who can guide them.” SP Mary Lou Bradley added, “If the students have no exposure to this, they won’t know how to help.”

Helping students get experience working with people with disabilities (PWDs) puts SPWDs in a unique position. Many of the nursing students take advantage of interacting the SPs. I was amazed at the enthusiasm they displayed and their willingness to ask questions, even those that are hard or probing. Many asked questions I’m not usually asked by a healthcare professional. Some asked questions regarding our specific disabilities. Others asked about what if any effect our disabilities have on our daily lives.

In some of the encounters, the SP went off script due to sporadic and unplanned issues. I myself experienced neck stiffness and back spasms during sessions, and improvised by having my leg hang off the bed, hoping that one of the students would notice that I was in fact very uncomfortable. Many did pick up on this signal and took the initiative to make me more comfortable. Another interesting aspect of these sessions as an SP is having the same students work with us across multiple years, whether it be one-on-one or in a group setting.

The staff of the College of Nursing, headed by Dr. Suzanne Smeltzer, has been researching health issues for people with disabilities for over 20 years. One significant conclusion they made is that the issue of disability is not adequately addressed in nursing texts or teachings. “Real” people with disabilities were added to the SP program to address this issue head on.

This program has been a learning process for all involved, as students have shown their inexperience dealing with people with disabilities. When SP Jim Smith, who utilizes a wheelchair full-time, was asked to get onto an examination table, it took a few awkward moments before the student adjusted and the session continued without Jim needing to move. Jim knew that that student was not likely to repeat that error.

Sometimes broaching the subject of disability has proved problematic: in more than one encounter students have referred to my Spina Bifida as an illness or disease, rather than a congenital disorder, reinforcing the need for this valuable training.
The future of this program seems secure due to the many people committed to its success. I speak for every program participant when I say being a part of the Standardized Patient Program at Villanova University has been one of the most unique and rewarding experiences of my life.

**ASPE Research and Project Award Recipient 2012: Poster Abstract Winner INACSL 2014**

**Title:** Use of Standardized Patients with Disabilities in an Undergraduate Nursing Program

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**Topic and its importance or relevance to the conference theme(s)**

Patients with disabilities (PWD) frequently report poor communication from healthcare professionals, compromised or lack of competent care, negative attitudes by nursing staff and fear related to quality of care. To date, few nursing education curricula address disability to adequately prepare undergraduate students for caring for this population. This study explores the influence of simulation scenarios that integrate the use of standardized patients with disabilities into an undergraduate baccalaureate nursing curriculum on students’ perceptions about PWDs.

**Background/Purpose**

The goal of this mixed method study was to improve the ability of undergraduate baccalaureate nursing students to provide health care to PWD by introducing standardized patients (SPs) with actual disabilities into their program. Six individuals with disabilities were recruited and trained to assume the role of SPs in the undergraduate program and participated in simulation scenarios across all levels of the program beginning with the freshman year.

**Methods or practice used**

The attitudes of undergraduate nursing students toward PWD were assessed before and after their experience with SPs with disabilities using the Attitudes toward Disabled Persons A (ATDP-A) and Interaction with Disabled Persons Scale. Both scales have been used to assess the attitudes of health care professionals as well as non-health care providers towards PWD; both instruments have been found to be valid and reliable measures. The SPs with disabilities participated in a focus group to provide feedback about the program and suggestions for its improvement. This data increased the researchers’ knowledge and insight into the experience as perceived and experienced by the SPs and helped identify strategies to improve the
experience for them and the nursing students.

Findings

Findings and significance of the Attitudes toward Disabled Persons A (ATDP-A) and Interaction with Disabled Persons Scale and the SP focus group will be discussed.

Conclusions

Integration of simulation scenarios using standardized PWD provides an opportunity to educate students on the care of this vulnerable population of patients in the healthcare system. Because of patient perceptions and lack of empirical evidence in this area, studies such as this one are needed to improve the research base in the area of PWD in nursing. The success of this simulation program provides support for the integration of SPs with disabilities into other undergraduate baccalaureate nursing curricula.

References

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