

ORIGINAL PAPER

Empathy Levels in Undergraduate Paramedic Students

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Abstract

Introduction Empathetic behaviour is regarded as a positive trait amongst healthcare professionals and has been attributed to increased patient compliance, greater patient satisfaction, and greater diagnostic accuracy and reduced rates of clinical errors. Despite this, past studies have shown that healthcare students fail to recognise the importance of empathetic behaviour in patient care and display significant empathy decline throughout their studies. In particular, paramedic students have typically displayed lower rates of empathy when compared to their healthcare counterparts. The objective of this study is to assess both the level of empathy and changes in empathy in undergraduate paramedic students over a 3-year period at a single tertiary institution.

Method A cross sectional study employing a convenience sample of first, second and third year undergraduate paramedic students at Monash University from 2008-2010. Student empathy scores were measured with the Jefferson Scale of Empathy – Health Profession Student version (JSE-HPS); a validated, self-reporting questionnaire.

Results 552 students were enrolled in the study, of which 69% were females and 83% were aged under 25. The mean overall JSE-HPS score for the cohort was 108.60 (SD=12.50). Female students displayed significantly higher empathy scores of 110.27 (SD=11.62) compared to males at 105.36 (SD=13.57). There was also a significant difference ($p=0.03$) noted between the 2008 JSE-HPS score 106.32 (SD=14.02), when compared to the 2009 cohort, 110.18 (SD=12.91). There was no significant difference found in mean JSE-HPS scores across differing age groups.

Conclusion Results from this study suggest that paramedic students display lower empathy than those reported by fellow healthcare students within the literature. Additionally, this study provides further evidence that females are typically more empathetic than their male counterparts in the same profession. The fact that empathy levels did not decline significantly throughout the course as expected defies current literature and is worthy of future investigation.

Keywords: Empathy, Undergraduates, Paramedics