Virtual interviews between medical students and in-patients during COVID-19 pandemic

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1 | WHAT PROBLEMS WERE ADDRESSED?

First-year undergraduate medical students at School of Medicine of University of São Paulo have a discipline that associates medicine and humanities, introducing the humanisation of care. One of their educational activities is a professor-led meeting between students and in-patients. In this activity, students conduct in-person interviews with patients, focusing on patients’ beliefs, values, culture, social determinants and clinical considerations on their illness. Especially for first-year students, who usually have a limited contact with patients, the activity offers a significant experience that reinforces the learning of humanisation. In early 2020, in consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, learning had to be adapted to a virtual mode. However, like other educators, we have undertaken efforts to connect students, professors and patients, as an essential part of medical training.

2 | WHAT WAS TRIED?

The activity was carried out in three virtual classes (two with students and lecturers, one including students, patients and lecturers) for a total of 16 hours of workload. It involved 178 students, 12 lecturers and 72 patients. As students did not have previous experience of interviewing patients, we asked them to study the theoretical content and watch a video demonstrating main communication skill to conduct a medical interview, through a digital learning. Subsequently, we held videoconferences with small groups of students to guide behaviours and rules of professionalism to interview with patients. Consent was obtained from the patients. In the day scheduled to the interviews, each lecturer connected a group of eight students with one in-patient using a tablet. Students were under direct supervision of professors all the time. Students were in their homes, while lecturers and patients were in the wards. After one week, by videoconference, students presented a seminar made with the data collected during the interviews. In this session, lecturers discussed the presentations, emphasising each patient as a whole being.

3 | WHAT LESSONS WERE LEARNED?

Students and professors evaluated the activity as strongly positive. Even patients enjoyed the interviews and produced amazing narratives about their life stories. Fifty-seven percentage of students rated the virtual experience as excellent and 39% good. They appreciated the connection with peers, professors and mainly with patients. Regarding the interviews with patients, 89% of the students evaluated them as excellent and 10% good. Comparing rates, 2020 was better than 2019, when 72% the students rated the face-to-face interviews as excellent and 22% good. Nevertheless, students expressed a desire to restore the face-to-face experience soon after pandemic control.

In the words of one student: ‘The interaction among us and patients was rewarding. The patients’ stories were extraordinary’. We observed that although the virtual interviews do not provide the same enrichment as the face-to-face ones in terms of non-verbal language, they provide a good learning for the humanised care when based on a meaningful experience of empathy and recognition of values expressed in interpersonal relationships. In addition, we noted that it was an opportunity to relieve of the social isolation, supporting students in times of such loneliness.

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