

O.18.2**How different dimensions of medical students' empathy relate to mental health and burnout***Presenter(s):*

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Background: Empathy has long been recognized as a multi-dimensional construct and its different dimensions might relate differently to mental health and burnout. The presence of depression and burnout has been shown to relate to lower empathy in medical students. Nevertheless, studies including different dimensions of empathy when investigating its link to mental health issues are rare in the context of undergraduate medical education, where the first foundations of physicians' clinical skills are laid. The aim of the present study was thus to investigate how medical students' mental health (depressive symptoms and anxiety) and burnout relate to different dimensions of empathy.

Methods: This cross-sectional study included 886 medical students from curriculum years 1 to 6 who filled in an online questionnaire. The cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of empathy were measured with self-report questionnaires and an emotion recognition test. Regressions were used to test the relationship between the empathy dimensions, depressive symptoms, anxiety, and burnout as well as the influence of curriculum year and gender.

Findings: Cognitive and behavioural empathy were significantly related to less mental health issues and burnout, whereas affective empathy was related to more mental health issues and burnout. Students in later curriculum years reported less mental health issues and burnout than students in earlier years, whereas no systematic difference could be observed for empathy. Female students reported more mental health issues and burnout as well as higher empathy, except for behavioural empathy for which male students scored higher.

Discussion: The cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions of empathy were differently related to the mental health and burnout of medical students. Students presenting mental health issues or burnout might have more difficulty to adapt their behaviour in social situations and keep a certain distance when taking the perspective of others.

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O.18.3**Improving medical students' interpersonal communication skills; applying cochrane review evidence***Presenter(s):*

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Background: The demand for medical students to be trained to communicate effectively has seen the emergence of interpersonal communication skills as core graduate competencies in medical training. We conducted a systematic review of interventions for medical students aiming to improve interpersonal communication in medical consultations.

Methods: We searched five electronic databases in September 2020 and screened reference lists of relevant articles. We included randomised controlled trials, cluster-RCTs, and non-randomised controlled trials evaluating the effectiveness of interventions delivered to students in pre-service medical programmes. Standard Cochrane methodological procedures were used.

Findings: We found 91 publications relating to 76 separate studies (involving 10,124 students). We performed meta-analysis according to comparison and outcome. Outcomes reporting on overall communication skills, empathy, rapport or relationship building, patient perceptions/satisfaction, information gathering, and explanation and planning were reported separately. The quality of evidence ranged from moderate to very low, and there was high, unexplained heterogeneity. Overall, interventions had positive effects on most outcomes, but generally small effect sizes and low quality limit the conclusions that can be drawn.

Key Findings: for discussion include: programmes that include personalised feedback probably improve medical students' overall communication skills more than programmes that involve general or no feedback; and online or self-directed programmes may make little to no difference in improving skills in empathy or rapport compared with face-to-face teaching.

Discussion: Since publication of the papers in the review, the tertiary education sector has been rocked by the global Covid-19 pandemic. Taken together, the results of our review and the subsequent pandemic-related experiences lend weight to the notion that 'when taught, students will learn'. Combining the lessons of the review with those of the pandemic, we are in a position to offer well-informed guidance to educators and accreditors about the most practical and evidence-based approaches to teaching communication skills.

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