



COMMUNICATION SKILLS TRAINING
FOR GENERAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Rather than a linear progression of ideas, this thesis took a kaleidoscopic view of aspects of teaching medical students communication skills at a time when they were entering their clinical years. The work was done when the author was the Director of the General Practice Teaching Unit at Modbury in South Australia between 1990 and 2000. During this time the author co-ordinated and taught Communication Skills at this unit for all Fourth Year Medical Students from the University of Adelaide, South Australia.

This thesis integrated reports of 12 data-gathering exercises centred on medical student communication skills, with the international literature and also with the author's reflections as an experienced educator and general practitioner. A novel perspective of this thesis was the analysis in a general practice setting of the behaviour of both medical student and standardised patient (SP) with relation to communication in the consultation. Videotaping consultations between medical students and standardised patients allowed the observation of not only the types of questions the students asked, but also their non verbal behaviour. Similarly the non verbal behaviour of standardised patients was analysed.

Initially the literature on factors in the modern medical school which could possibly act as barriers to communication skills training (CST) were discussed. Then the literature on the reason for teaching CST was described and the first study

of the thesis presented the responses of a large sample of South Australians about discussing feelings and emotions with their usual general practitioner. Following this, the literature on whether CST for doctors could improve patient outcomes was described and the second thesis study followed concerning CST outcomes on students' questioning behaviour.

Next the literature about changes in medical schools was discussed and two thesis studies followed; one about CST and the impact of Problem Based Learning and the other about the motivation of the volunteer Standardised Patients.

Medical students' attitudes were analysed in the next four studies in the thesis. These included their perceptions of CST and general practice values, videotaping consultations, consulting and possible outcomes of consulting.

Next SPs' non verbal behaviour and their perceptions of the students' consulting behaviour was described followed by a study on SP satisfaction and the duration of student eye contact with them in the consultation. A further study on student eye contact involved subsequent use of open questions by the student as well as the SPs' feelings of "enablement" and satisfaction.

To see if students' confidence about psychological aspects of consulting matched their actual behaviour, a study was undertaken to assess this and also to see what the SP felt about the student's consultation.

Finally the summary of the study results were described and a personal view given of the future of undergraduate general practice teaching. It was felt that communication skills training in a general practice setting should be a crucial factor in all future training of medical students.