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Confronting Stigma through Education - Using Harm Reduction as Example

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Introduction

Health science students often do not recognize their own biases toward clients in difficult treatment areas, such as mental health and addiction. Likewise, health care education courses often teach the understanding of addiction and its treatment from a traditional medical model, which does not appear to lessen the stigma health care professionals, including occupational therapy students, attach to those impacted by addiction.

Objectives

A community harm reduction program (Streetworks) in Edmonton, Canada and a team of educators from the University of Alberta partnered to develop a module to address stigma and addictions in a course offered concurrently to students from all of our health science programs[1]. The module was designed to give students some of the tools necessary in identifying their own biases and minimizing stigma early on in training, as well as to develop the module's key objectives, centering around community level client care, communication skills, client empathy and conflict resolution.

Method

Students from nine health disciplines work together on a Harm Reduction module which requires student teams to examine how harm reduction approaches and patient-centred care models are interlinked. Students work through a three-stage scenario based on the story of a former client of Streetworks. At each stage more information and additional questions are given to the student teams. Pre and post scenario surveys were administered to all students to examine personal attitudes as well as learning that occurred during the module.

Results

Six hundred health science students responded: 72% recognized they had a new realization of the complexity of the issue, and significant learning over the course of the module. 82.3% of the occupational therapy students experienced a significant attitude shift. Only 5.9% of the overall students stated that they had learned nothing and would not support harm reduction.

Conclusions & Contribution

The module engaged students actively in learning about addictions and their personal attitudes, and allowed them to understand the diversity of attitudes that can impact practice in the future.

[1] Medicine, Dentistry, Dental Hygiene, Medical Laboratory Science, Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Nursing, Nutrition (Dietetics program), and Pharmacy.