

## Impact of Teaching Communication Skills to Undergraduate Medical Students

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Effective communication between doctor and patient helps in improving compliance as well as decreases the risk of complications associated with the treatment. Therefore, medical students need to be trained in communication skills as a part of their curriculum. For this, number of teaching methods are being used one of which is role play demonstration. The objective of the present study is to teach the students the importance of communicating details of drug therapy to the patient using role play and then analysing their perception regarding this method of teaching and learning.

**Method:** Ninety MBBS students of 3<sup>rd</sup> semester (Second prof) were enrolled for the study. Four sessions on prescription writing by didactic lectures were taken to teach them how prescriptions are written and two classes were taken on the importance of communication skills regarding drug therapy. This was followed by role-play demonstrations on how to communicate the details of their prescription medication to the patients. After this, student volunteers acted as physicians and demonstrated the same case scenario to the other students who acted as simulated patients. Students then gave their feedback by filling prevalidated questionnaires. Data was analysed by simple descriptive statistics.

**Results:** 88 % of the students agreed that role play is a feasible way of learning. Majority of the students found role

play to be useful and effective. 97% of the students agreed that learning communication skills has improved their confidence in communicating with the patient especially the details of drug therapy.

**Conclusion:** Communication skills are essential to be a good physician and these can be effectively learnt by role play demonstrations.

**Key words:** Students, Communication Skills, Role Play, Feedback.

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### INTRODUCTION

Effective communication skills help build confidence, increase adherence to treatment plan and reduce burden of disease on the community.<sup>1-3</sup> A physicians expertise lies in his ability to show empathy, explain the disease and the various treatment options available, counsel the patients, make the patient aware of the risks and complications as regards to his illness and its treatment, the need for follow up and also resolves the patients queries in a language which the patient can understand.<sup>4-6</sup>

The WHO recommends effective communication skills as an important aspect of good prescribing. The Vision 2015 document of the MCI emphasizes on the value of training in communication skills for Indian medical graduates.<sup>7</sup> Training in communication skills needs to be incorporated in the medical curriculum, and the sooner the better. It should be started in preclinical years as an investment for the future competent physicians.<sup>8,9</sup> Conventional medical teaching (lectures, theory and practical classes) helps

the students establish diagnosis and plan treatment options, but does not teach the communication skills to deal with the patients in real life situations.<sup>10,11</sup>

A number of approaches have been used to help the medical students develop and inculcate these communication skills. These include ward round based teaching, small group learning, case based discussions, bedside teaching, role play demonstration with simulated patients, problem based learning.<sup>12</sup>

Among these, role play demonstration, as a means to introduce effective communication skills has been found to be quite useful and is being implemented widely nowadays in preclinical settings.<sup>13,14</sup>

A recent study reported that students felt more confident in communicating drug-related information after attending role-play sessions as compared to those who did not.<sup>15</sup>

Since, invariably prescription is the major outcome of almost every doctor patient encounter, communication skills regarding the details of prescription medications are therefore considered to be a fundamental constituent of effective medical practice.<sup>15,16</sup>

A recent study on 264 outdoor patients revealed that although majority of these patients were aware of the therapeutic effects as well as the routes of administration of their prescription medication, many of them were unaware of the adverse effects and precautions associated with the use of these drugs.<sup>5</sup>

The present study was therefore designed and conducted to know the students perception of importance of introducing prescription medication communication skills to them and also if they found role play demonstration to be an effective tool for communicating the same.

## MATERIAL & METHODS

After taking approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC), the present study was conducted in the Department of Pharmacology, Gian Sagar Medical College, Banur, Punjab. Scenario of common gastrointestinal (GIT) disorders were discussed among the faculty members of Pharmacology Department and complete prescriptions were prepared, written and validated.

A sensitization programme for faculty and students regarding the study was done and the purpose and nature of the study were explained. Four didactic lectures on prescription writing were taken.

The prescription for diarrhoea was chosen because diarrhoea is one of the most common causes of mortality in developing countries and the general population is not aware of its treatment. Two didactic lectures on the general aspects of communication skills (both verbal and nonverbal) were also taken and the students were sensitised about the importance of communicating details of drug therapy to the patient.

Two feedback questionnaires for the students were developed and validated. One questionnaire to know the students perception regarding the usefulness of role play as an effective tool for teaching and learning and other questionnaire regarding the students perception of importance of prescription communication skills while dealing with patients as well as the use of role play as a tool for enhancing the prescription communication skills.

The feedback questionnaires consisted of 6 questions each on a 5-point likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). The students who participated in the

pilot study for questionnaire validation were excluded from the present study.

Ninety MBBS students of 3<sup>rd</sup> semester (Second prof) were enrolled for the study. The students were informed that their participation is anonymous and voluntary. As a part of prescription writing exercises in GIT, all students had already been given complete prescription of diarrhoea.

Also, they had been taught the importance of communication skills in their didactic lectures during theory class. The students attended role-play demonstrations on how to communicate with patients regarding drug treatment. This included introducing oneself to the patient, explaining the disease and aim of giving those drugs, their dose, frequency, duration, expected side effects and warnings. During these demonstrations, a faculty member and a volunteer student played the roles of a prescribing physician and a patient, respectively.

Later on, student volunteers were asked to act as physician and demonstrate the same case scenario to the other students who acted as simulated / dummy patients.

At the end of the session, the two prevalidated questionnaires were administered to know the student's perception of using role play as an effective tool for teaching and learning and also for introducing drug therapy communication. Data was entered into Microsoft Office Excel Software and analysed by simple descriptive statistics.

## RESULTS

Eighty Six (86) % students agreed that learning through role play was interesting and 88% of the students were of the view that role play was a feasible way of learning.

Majority of the students believed that role play was useful and effective; learning with role play improved attention span; 90% student wanted more such role play demonstrations. Most of the students (93%) expressed that role play sessions be included in pharmacology curriculum.

In response to questions about their perception of improvement of communication skills with role play, 98% of the students revealed that learning communication skills has helped them improve communication with patients. 97% of the students agreed that learning communication skills has improved their confidence in communicating with the patient. Majority of them were of the view that learning communication skills has improved their confidence in communicating the details of drug therapy- its role, dose, frequency, duration, side effects, and warnings.

88% of the students thought that learning communication skills will help them perform better in future. These sessions helped them understand and retain concepts of pharmacology better, was the opinion of 84% students. 92% students realized that communicating details of drug therapy is important to minimize medication errors.

The item-wise responses to the student feedback questionnaires are shown in Fig 1 and 2. There was a general consensus among the students about the significance of learning medication communication skills.

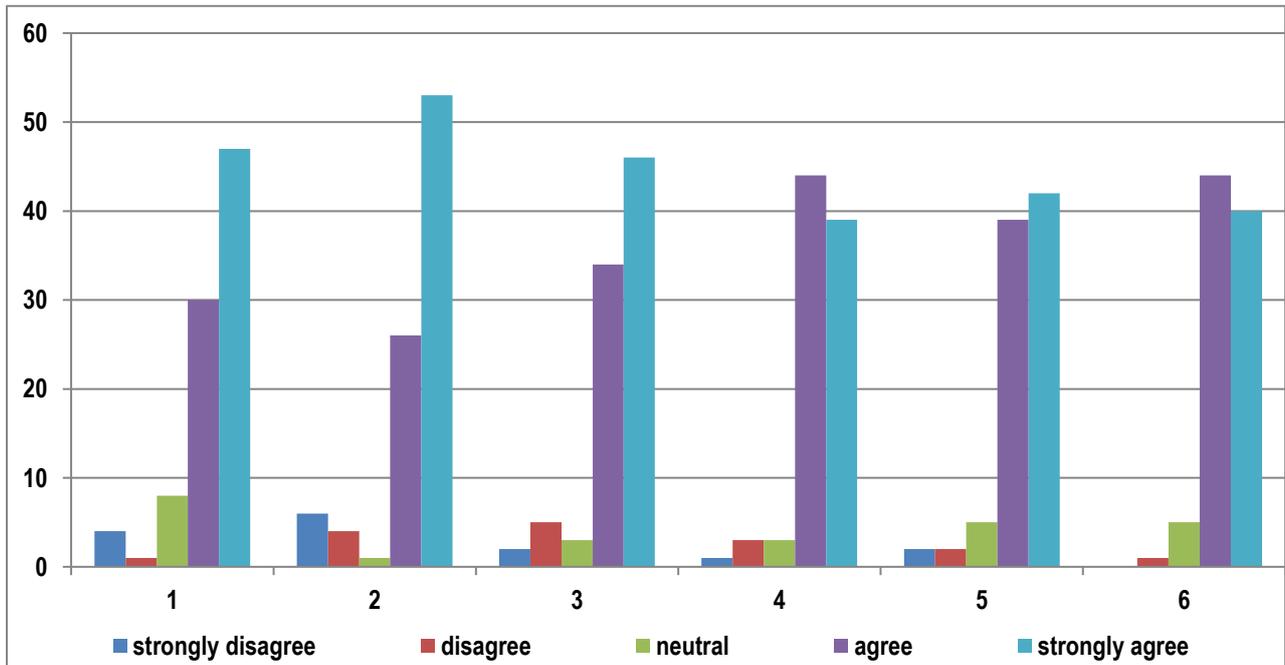
## DISCUSSION

One of the most important aspects of every patient doctor interview is communication regarding prescription medications. It is hence imperative to teach communication skills to the medical

undergraduates. 86% of the students agreed that learning communication skills with the help of role play is interesting.

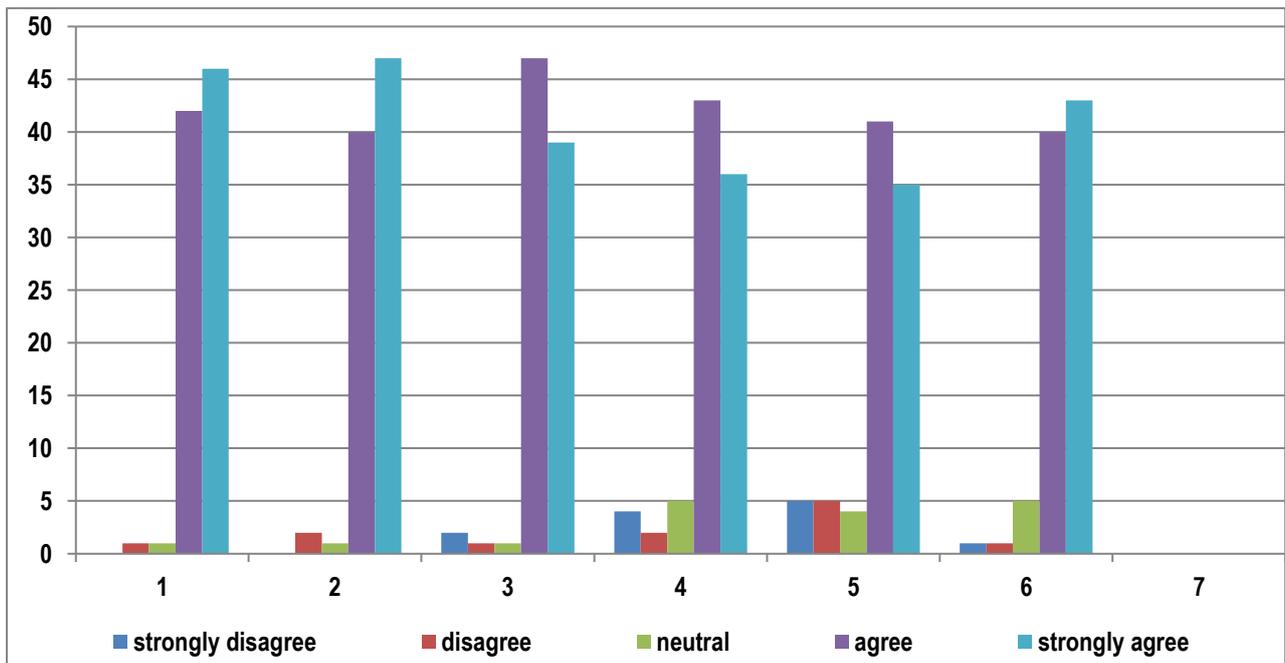
Likewise, in a study by Lavanya et al, 90% of the students found role play to be innovative and worthwhile.<sup>17</sup>

**Fig 1: The response to the student feedback questionnaire regarding perception of use of role play as a teaching learning tool**



Here 1: Learning through role play is interesting; 2: Role play is a feasible way of learning; 3: Role play is useful and effective; 4: Learning with role play improves attention span; 5: I prefer more such role play demonstrations; 6: Role play sessions be included in pharmacology curriculum

**Fig 2: The response to the student feedback questionnaire regarding perception as to introduction of communication skills with role play**



Here 1: Learning communication skills has helped me improve communication with patients; 2: Learning communication skills has improved my confidence in communicating with the patient; 3: Learning communication skills has improved my confidence in communicating the details of drug therapy- its role, dose, frequency, duration, side effects, warnings; 4: Learning communication skills will help me perform better in future; 5: These sessions helped me understand and retain concepts of pharmacology better; 6: Communicating details of drug therapy is important to minimize medication errors

In our study, 88 % of the students opined that role play is a feasible way of learning. This finding goes well with another study where 81% students were of the same opinion.<sup>18</sup> Majority of the students found role play to be a useful and effective tool for teaching communication skills. Same has been corroborated by Lavanya et. al.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the students felt the importance of communicating drug therapy details to the patient with majority of the students gave a positive opinion.

Wright et al reported that even though the attitude of first and fourth year MBBS students towards learning communication skills was the same, the fourth year medical students were more confident in communicating with the patients.<sup>19</sup> This reflects that there is improvement in communication skills as the students feel the importance of these in clinical postings during their interaction with patients.

It is evident from the present study that this approach helped the students become more confident in communicating with the patient the details about the of drug therapy – its role, dose, frequency, duration, adverse effects, warnings associated with it. These findings are compatible with other studies, which reported that there was an increase in student's confidence about medication communication skills after training.<sup>15</sup> The students were of the view that this session being interactive helped them learn better than routine didactic lectures.

Our study as well as a study by Lavanya et al reported that majority of the students agree that effective communication skills regarding prescription medication are important to minimize medication errors.<sup>17</sup>

Based on the observation of the present study, communication skills can be imparted to medical students by the faculty and practiced to increase competency. In the present study, we introduced and assessed the use of role play demonstrations to improve the prescription medication communication skills in the medical students.

The students gave a positive response to this experience and they acknowledged the importance of communicating with patients so as to give them proper medical treatment in their role of competent physicians. A few students were hesitant in performing the role of a physician, they were motivated and counseled so that in the end they agreed to participate actively in role play demonstrations.

There are certain limitations in our study: more number of students could have been involved in the study but time constraint didn't allow us to enroll more students. More number of topics could be taught and evaluated to know the importance of role play as a teaching learning tool.

Open ended questions to analyze the qualitative aspects would have explored the student's perception in depth. The merit of using role play for the acquisition of drug therapy communication aptitude can be objectively assessed by the students' performance in an OSPE exam.

More studies need to be conducted to further elucidate the importance of other methods to teach communication skills regarding drug therapy in our quest for most suitable and effective teaching learning tool.

To conclude learning and polishing their prescription communication skills will help the students a long way in their clinical practice throughout life. Training in communication skills

will help enhance clinical competence, self-confidence and attain learning objectives.

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