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Disability Health Training: Unpacking Power Dynamics by Listening to Lived Experience

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Keywords

Education, Medical; Health Education; Patient-Centered Care; Disabled Persons; Stereotyping; Students, Medical; Health Services Accessibility; Patient Care; Power-sharing

Abstract

According to a survey of 234 OHSU medical students, 87.4% of respondents disagreed when asked if the OHSU curriculum adequately covered disability and 72.4% disagreed that the OHSU curriculum prepared students to work with PWD in clinical rotations (Hillmer, Horner-Johnson, & Eppelsheimer, 2023). In response to these findings, OHSU launched a first-of-its kind 10-week disability elective at the School of Medicine in 2022. Pre- and post-elective student surveys demonstrated self-reported improvements in comfort, attitudes, and clinical competency working with PWD after completion of the course.

Another recent national study showed that only 41% of physicians surveyed were “very confident” about their ability to provide the same quality of care to PWD as those without, and only 57% strongly agreed that they welcomed people with disabilities into their practices (Lagu et al., 2022). While these data suggest an awareness of such tendencies, studies show that providers' implicit biases often result in discriminatory practices. Many progressive, well-meaning HCPs possess subconscious attitudes about PWD, which can drive their behavior and decision-making processes about disabled patients (VanPuymbrouck et al, 2020). Medicalized attitudes and lack of provider knowledge contributes to the HCP ‘myth of control’ over disability, and ultimately lead to inequities in healthcare access and outcomes for PWD (Crossley, 2015; VanPuymbrouck et al, 2020). Understanding disability through a strengths-based, rather than deficit-oriented lens is critical to maintaining awareness of this power and deepening provider empathy.

Aims

This workshop aims to address and begin to dismantle implicit biases held by healthcare providers (HCPs) about their patients with disabilities (PWD). By bringing awareness to the impact of power dynamics in healthcare provision, both within individual clinical relationships as well as through the systematic reinforcement of stereotypes and stigmatization, HCPs can develop practices to create stronger partnerships with PWD and improve health outcomes. Educators who attend will be able to embed these elements into teaching sessions that they develop.

Methods & Active Learning Strategies

This workshop centers the perspectives of those with lived experience to highlight power dynamics and increase provider empathy (Miller, 2015; McNally et al., 2022). This includes patient narratives to facilitate appreciation of strengths within the disability community and encourage a strengths-based approach to care (Miller, 2015). Through individual reflections, storytelling, role play and large group discussion, participants will engage in empathy-building exercises with colleagues and community members to better understand their patients' experiences within the various systems which they as providers serve.

Results/Impact

Research shows that disability health training increases provider comfort and competency (Agaronnik et al., 2019; Crossley, 2015; Ocloo, 2020; Iezzoni et al, 2022; Lagu et al, 2022). This ultimately increases trust within patient-provider relationships and improves health outcomes. By shifting from a medical to social model of disability in health education, the HCP perspective can evolve to view disability as a product of entrenched attitudes and inaccessible environments, rather than individual deficits. We argue that direct interaction with people with lived experience in educational settings will improve HCP empathy and level power differentials.

Diversity, Equity And Inclusion

There are approximately 42.5 million Americans with disabilities. Despite making up 13% of the U.S. population, PWD are often overlooked and excluded from diversity and equity discourse (Leppert and Schaeffer, 2023). The expansion of disability health training for providers is a critical step in increasing awareness of disability identity and culture to transform misperceptions, improve health access, and increase opportunities for inclusion in society more broadly.

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