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Learning the pelvic examination

Karin Siwe

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Fakultetsopponent

Sari Ponzer

Professor i ortopedi vid Institutionen för klinisk forskning och
utbildning,
Södersjukhuset, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm

Division of Gender and Medicine,
Department of Clinical and Experimental Medicine
Faculty of Health Sciences Linköping University
SE-581 85 Linköping
Sverige



FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES
LINKÖPING UNIVERSITY

Abstract

The inspiration for the present studies was the learning concept that used professional patients (PP) as instructors for medical students in learning how to perform the pelvic examination (PE).

Interviews performed with women who were PPs showed that they experienced a continuous beneficial increase in knowledge. This promoted personal development related to bodily awareness and affirmed their femininity, making them less vulnerable and reversing their approach to their own body of being an object to becoming a subject. The growing ability to contribute to students' learning and the feeling of being valuable enhanced the PPs self-esteem and well-being and promoted independence in the learning situation. Being a PP was rewarding and contributed to the feeling of being empowered and growing as a woman in the examination chair.

Two models of teaching the PE to medical students were compared: with PPs or with clinical patients (CP). The outcome showed that the PP students were more skilful in palpating the uterus and ovaries and performed more PEs during the clinical clerkship than did CP students.

Female and male medical students were interviewed after they had performed their first PE with PPs as instructors. The female students' most obvious concern was about looking and touching another women's vulva whereas male students were concerned about how to establish rapport with the PP. The interactive and supportive feedback from the PPs enabled the students to overcome their hesitation and encouraged creative learning of interpersonal and palpation skills. The learning session (LS) positively enhanced the female students' awareness of own bodies and promoted a deeper interest in PEs, both as an examiner and as patients. The male students became aware of the importance of creating a beneficial interaction with the woman and gained an insight into a previously "unknown" female world that deepened their understanding of women's possible vulnerability during a PE.

Women at an outpatient clinic participated in individual LSs about the female anatomy and the PE, and performed a PE on a mannequin prior to visiting the gynaecologist. Following the visit interviews were performed to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the LS. The women's active participation during the LS generated increased self-confidence and knowledge, triggered empowerment and promoted a creative ability to interact subsequently during their own PE.

Part of the studies involved developing a questionnaire to measure the fear of performing the pelvic examination, the Fear of Pelvic Examination Scale (F-PEXS). The questionnaire was shown to have a very good reliability (e.g. Cronbach alpha is .96) and good construct validity.

Engaging voluntary, healthy and knowledgeable women as instructors in the PE situation creates a safe and ethical learning environment and promotes interaction with students. Immediate constructive feedback enables students to integrate communication and behavioural skills in a professional manner whilst learning to palpate the uterus, facilitating an inner security as a future examiner.

The LSs were of benefit to the PPs, the female students in the PP model, and the women in the clinical study. The acquired knowledge started something positive within the women; a will to act and find out more about themselves. The LSs initiated empowerment in the sense that an empowered person has increased capacity to act in goal-directed ways.