

Communication and Management Skills Training Programme 2014

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Background

Worldwide it is accepted that effective doctor-patient communication is a central factor in building a therapeutic doctor-patient relationship, which in turn is the heart and art of medicine (1). The ultimate goal of good doctor-patient communication is to achieve the best outcome and patient satisfaction (2).

Research suggests communication skills do not reliably improve with experience (3). Communication skills training has been found to improve doctor-patient communication (3-5). However, formal training in communication and management skills are not included in current undergraduate or postgraduate medical curricula. In Sri Lanka, there is no current mechanism of training communication skills to the practicing medical doctors on a regular basis.

“Communication and Management Skills Training Programme” was conceived and conducted for the first time in Sri Lanka targeting doctors who were awaiting their post-internship appointments for the year 2014. A training programme aimed at training these doctors who are awaiting their first post intern appointments is a practical and cost effective way to inculcate the skills of communication at an early stage in their careers.

The objective of the communication and management skills training programme was to improve the knowledge and attitudes of post-intern doctors on effective communication and management skills as well as empowering them with essential skills for achieving these.

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The communication and management skills programme was developed in a stepwise manner.

Step 1: A communication council was formed under the patronage of the Government Medical Officers’ Association (GMOA) with the objective of generating a motivated, trained medical officer with good communication skills and public relations skills.

Step 2: Two groups of master trainers were trained at Health Education Bureau in September 2013. Experts in the fields of communication and management participated as trainers. The master trainers were volunteers who turned up for the training on “Communication and Management Skills” and who intended to be trained furthermore to train other doctors.

Step 3: In November 2013 these trainers were evaluated and course materials were developed. They were further trained in Educational Science. As a part of course material two handbooks (6, 7) were developed with the contribution of the experts in the field of communication in Sri Lanka.

Step 4: Pre workshop training needs assessment

A structured online questionnaire was used for the pre workshop needs assessment. Participants had to fill this at the time of registration to the workshop. A total of 670 post intern medical officers participated in the assessment. Two hundred and one (30.0%) admitted that their communication skills were “not good”. Course materials were amended based on the results of the pre-workshop needs assessment to deliver the most “in-demand” skills at the workshop.

Step 5: Training programme for post intern doctors on communication and management skills was conducted in February 2014 at Kularathena Hall, Ananda College. Around 500 post intern medical officers participated. The two groups of master trainers were the resource persons for the workshop. The workshop covered main areas such as active listening, breaking bad news, public relations, team work, public communication, counselling, emotional intelligence, doctors and media, administrative aspects, financial regulations etc. Lectures, role plays, video presentations, discussions were adopted as teaching methods.

Step 6: After completion of the workshop the participants’ feedback was evaluated using a structured self-administered questionnaire. Three hundred and thirty four responded and their responses were recorded using a 5 point likert scale. Overall rating of the programme was 4.05 and content of the programme was 4.01. However, perceived involvement of the participants was 3.16.

Step 7: This programme was modified and replicated for doctors working in the Kalutara District in March 2014. About 180 doctors participated in this programme. The pre and post evaluations from this programmer are being analysed at present.

Discussion

Training the entire medical community in Sri Lanka in communication and management skills is an enormous, but necessary and overdue task. At the same time, to ensure that they are trained on a regular basis minimising regression of skills is important. It was noted that the volunteers who opted to become master trainers participated as trainers in both programmes (Step 5 and Step 7) and they have expressed a wish to continue their roles in the future too. It is generally observed that they are developing their expertise in their selected fields with some progressing in post-graduate education. In the future they may contribute to train a second line of trainers to ensure the sustainability of the programme.

The main limitation of the programme was with 500 participants on all 2 days it was difficult to get the trainees actively participated in the programme. Retaining the master trainers within the programme is another challenge. At present, there is no financial incentive for the master trainers to conduct this programme.

This programme will be incorporated into the national level “Good Intern Programme”, conducted by the GMOA and Ministry of Health for pre-intern doctors before commencing their appointment. This will require a group in excess of 1000 to be trained annually, with a possible refresher course before their definitive post-intern appointment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Employing master trainers may be an effective method for a national programme on training communication and management skills, which is intended to be taken to other localities and levels. The defined skills in communication and management may be adopted by other countries in the region.

Funding

We wish to acknowledge the Ministry of Health (ET&R) for providing funding and coordination throughout the programme.

We would like to acknowledge our master trainers of communication training programme

Dr Sameera Hewage, Dr Anuruddha Padeniya, Dr Buddhika Mahesh, Dr A. Sandanayake, Dr L.S. Perera, Dr F.R. Niyaz, Dr N. Peiris, Dr. Sidath Wijesekara, Dr N.M. Priyankara, Dr Chaminda Gunathilaka, Dr. N. Warnasuriya, Dr. K. T. Dhammika, Dr K. Muthukumarana, Dr A. Weerasinghe,

Dr Dineshan Ranasinghe, Dr Lasantha Jinadasa, Dr Sarada Kannangara, Dr Prasantha Gamage, Dr Gayani Imbulana, Dr Upul Indunil Perera, Dr Tharaka Fernando, Dr T. Kahaduwa, Dr K. Muthukumarana, Dr D. M. P. S. Bandara, Dr C. Attapaththu

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