

How can empathy be improved in healthcare consultations? A secondary analysis of data

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Abstract

Background: Empathy is a critical part of the healthcare consultation that can improve patient health outcomes, quality of life and satisfaction with care. This analysis is part of a larger study (Empathica), which aims to enable health care practitioners (HCPs) to improve outcomes for patients with Osteoarthritis pain through the development of a digital training tool to enhance HCP empathy. We examined papers included in a recent literature review to extract details about the methods used to train HCPs in empathy.

Aim: To investigate the components of effective training for HCPs in empathic communication.

Methods: Qualitative component analysis and Behaviour Change Technique (BCT) Taxonomy analysis were used to extract a) methods used to train HCPs, b) empathy behaviours that HCPs were trained in, c) BCTs used to train HCPs. Effect sizes were examined to identify trends.

Results: In the seven trials examined, the most frequently used methods of training were: face-to-face training, role-playing and videos. Empathy behaviours included: providing explanations of treatment; providing empathetic responses; eliciting questions from patients; displaying a friendly manner; and using non-verbal behaviours. The most common BCTs employed were "Instruction on how to perform behaviour", "Credible Source" and "Behavioural practice". No trends were identified in effect size comparison.

Conclusion: We found some commonalities in empathy training that will help inform development of the Empathica digital training tool. However, this is limited by poor reporting of intervention components in the analysed papers.

Patient and Public Involvement (PPI)

Patient and public representatives (osteoarthritis patients/carers) were involved in the design and application process for the Empathica project, of which this study forms a part. A patient contributor from the Empathica research management team has reviewed the outcomes of this study from a patient perspective and is writing a lay summary to help with dissemination.