

A systematic review of the use of simulated patients and pharmacy practice research

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Abstract

Objective

The use of simulated patients to assess current practice, or to derive outcome measures for pharmacy practice research, has received much attention in recent years. A simulated patient is an individual who is trained to visit a pharmacy to enact a scenario testing specific behaviour of the pharmacist or pharmacy staff. The aim of this study was to provide a definitive review of the use of simulated patients as a methodological tool for pharmacy practice research.

Method

A systematic review was undertaken to identify all pharmacy practice studies that had used simulated patient methodology. The electronic databases searched to identify relevant studies were MEDLINE, EMBASE and CINAHL. Articles fulfilling all the following criteria were considered for inclusion in the review: primary reports of trials conducted in community pharmacy and drug store settings which used simulated patients to derive outcome measures. The review was not restricted by language or by country. The review was restricted to publications from 1976 to May 2005.

Key findings

In total, 56 full publications were retrieved for further examination, of which 46 studies were included in the review, including: nine randomised controlled trials, three controlled trials, 30 cross-sectional, two time-series and two other studies. Ten publications were excluded: seven reviews, one laboratory-based study, one telephone survey and one study presented only as an abstract.

Conclusions

There has been steady growth in the use of simulated patient methodology over the past 30 years. Although simulated patients have received negative attention in the pharmaceutical media, they can be a rigorous and robust method of measuring practice if used appropriately. This review demonstrates the range of activities for which this method can be used, including the assessment of counselling and advice provision, the treatment of minor and major illness, and the assessment of the public health activities of pharmacy and drug store staff. Simulated patient methodology has been used in developing countries to a similar, if not greater extent, than the developed world, demonstrating its versatility and applicability to pharmacy practice research globally.