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Preparing Tomorrow's Doctors to Care for People with Autism

What is this research about?

Compared to the general population, people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have poorer health and face unique barriers navigating the health care system. Communication and behavioural challenges make it hard for the two-way interaction typical for most medical diagnosis and treatment plans. Teaching doctors more about how to care for a patient with ASD may address some of the challenges. Although the need to train doctors in this area is recognized, it is unclear what the best methods are to deliver the content in an already crammed curriculum. This study examines the effectiveness of providing an online lecture and live panel discussion featuring people living with ASD and family members to medical school students.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers studied 99 3rd year medical school students that attended an online lecture about ASD and a panel discussion made of volunteers that were professionals, people with ASD and family members. Topics included the effect of diagnosis, misconceptions, stigma, healthcare experiences, medications, therapy, services, transition to adult services, and financing care. This was a required part of the students' curriculum. The students completed a questionnaire that captured self-reported changes in knowledge, understanding and skill. They also wrote an open-ended reflection piece about the experience. The researchers used

What you need to know:

Brief training for medical students about autism using a panel of self-advocates and family members is an effective learning tool.

thematic analysis to find common ideas in the written reflection.

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that students reported very positive or positive (5/5 or 4/5) changes around their knowledge of what to do or say, understanding the challenges faced, and their ability to provide better care. Males were less likely to report large changes. Previous knowledge about disability did not affect the amount of change in skill or knowledge. However, previous personal knowledge did increase the chances that the student would be interested in working with this population in the future.

In the reflection piece, most students reported better understanding of the features associated with ASD – even in those with previous knowledge. There was an increase in the knowledge of tools and strategies for future practice (e.g. minimizing waiting time, having comfort items, showing what will be done next). Lastly, students reported increased awareness of the healthcare barriers – especially the lack of transition services.

How can you use this research?

Brief training around ASD has a benefit for future healthcare providers. Panel discussions with people with ASD and their families increased the student' understanding of the challenges faced by those with disabilities. Differences in the reported changes that male and female students experienced in their knowledge and understanding need to be considered in developing training methods.

About the Researchers

Susan Havercamp (PhD) is an associate professor in psychiatry and Karen Ratliff-Schaub (MD) is a clinical assistant professor of pediatrics at Ohio State University.

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Citation

Havercamp S., Ratliff-Schaub K., Macho P.N., et al. (2016) Preparing Tomorrow's Doctors to Care for Patients With Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 54(3):202-216.

Keywords

Health Care, Autism, Training, Education, Medicine, Doctors

This research summary was written by Dr. Jonathan Lai for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

The Chair is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance, Health Canada, NeuroDevNet and the Sinneave Family Foundation. Additional support was provided by York University.

For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

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