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Letters to the Editor

Evaluation of a 'breaking bad news' course at the Charité, Berlin

Editor – Communication skills are rarely taught at German medical schools. In 2000 a group of six students and young doctors introduced an optional communication skills course at the Medical Faculty of the Humboldt University, Berlin. Through role-play students experience breaking bad news as a 'doctor' and 'patient'. Two tutors facilitate the discussion in a small group setting. All participants received practical and theoretical training during their years as tutors of 'Anamnesegruppen' (history taking groups).[1] Halfway through the course, students had the opportunity to discuss their observations and questions with two experienced doctors or psychologists.

The evaluation included seven questions regarding self-confidence, attitude

and motivation which were asked before and after the workshop. In addition, students were asked to rate the different sessions and the methods after the course.

Thirty-nine of the 41 participants (95%) completed and returned both forms. More than 75% of respondents were female students. The students self-rated their ability to break bad news to patients as improving after the course. Although students still felt a bit anxious and unsure about such tasks they felt significantly better prepared in terms of knowing what to say and how to structure the conversation. The motivation for role-play increased and students agreed that such a course should be part of the regular curriculum. The different sessions in small groups and with experienced doctors were rated positively and the students estimated the content of the course as highly relevant for clinical practice.

In summary, our findings indicate that the course format might help students to prepare for the task of breaking bad news in their future career. As shown by other studies[2] the participants felt more self-confident after the course and the methods were valued as very positive. A 'breaking bad news' course run recently as part of a surgery firm produced similar results to our study. This indicates that the positive results are not necessarily dependent on participant selection.

Since these results have shown short-term effects we plan to follow up this study as soon as the participants are working in clinical practice.

Communication skills training is a rare phenomenon at German medical schools. Encouraged by our findings, and because young physicians do not feel sufficiently prepared for tasks regarding the care of dying people,[3] for example breaking bad news, we hope to introduce this course as part of the regular curriculum at our faculty.

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