Sensitive examination of the breast in a medical setting: simulation using clinical teaching associates and consumer advocates – a program for medical students

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Aims:
To establish a simulated teaching program addressing the area of breast examination
• To evaluate the success of a program combining a clinical teaching associate session, simulation using a rubber breast model and a communications exercise with breast cancer consumer advocates
• To evaluate competency by reviewing results of a formal OSCE 18 months after participation in the program

Background: In Victoria, Australia breast cancer is the leading cause of female cancers and is the second highest cause of deaths. (1) Breast cancer has a well established screening program but it is still vital that medical practitioners are skilled in the area of communication and physical examination of the breast region.
Given the increasing difficulties of finding appropriate patients for clinical teaching (2), The University of Melbourne has established a simulated teaching program in the area of breast exam.

Methods: The program was established with three teaching components
1. Clinical Teaching Associate component. Training was undertaken to instruct teaching associates of the evidence-based technique for breast exam and also formal feedback to students
2. Simulation using rubber models with supervision under trained medical
3. Recruitment of breast cancer consumer advocates to simulate scenarios to which student may face and to illustrate the patient experience

The program was created as a half-day session. For the purpose of this study a whole year cohort was surveyed with subsequent follow up of results from a formal OS CE exam 18 months later.

**Results:** There were 262 participants. Over 97% had not had previous exposure to the breast examination as a teaching encounter with 78% indicating neutral or no confidence in undertaking the communication and examination components of the breast examination.

After the completion of the program 94% of students indicated that their learning needs had been met and that over 87% indicated increased confidence in undertaking the examination (p=0.001).

Students reported favourably on the following:

- The Clinical Teaching Associate (CTA) was able to give constructive feedback on physical examination technique (97%) and communication skills (87%)
- The Consumer Advocate increased my understanding of cancer care issues (90%)
- In ranking the program, the CTA ranked highest in usefulness followed by the Consumer Advocate and then breast model simulation (97%, 92% and 80% respectively)

On formal examination of the same group of students 18 months later, the OS CE median score for the breast examination was 78/100. The exam tested for both communication and breast examination technique.

**Conclusion:** The simulated program has been assessed as being useful and
appropriate for teaching of the breast examination. The components developed work synergistically together to maximise the learning experience in a time of increased student numbers. The OS CE assessment undertaken, 18 months later reflect retention of skills.

References:
