Empathy levels among Canadian paramedic students

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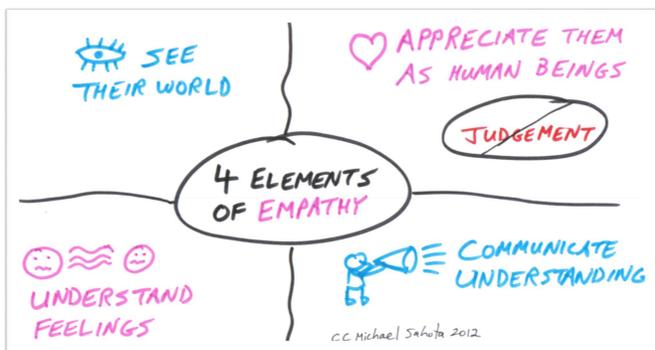Paramedic Programs, Fanshawe College, Ontario, Canada.

Background

- Empathy is an important factor in communication between healthcare provider and patient.
- Empathy improves patient satisfaction and buffers healthcare provider burnout
- Previous studies have shown that empathy can improve patient care.
- Previous studies in Australian paramedic students have demonstrated that empathy scores are low among paramedic students, scores decrease as one progresses through paramedic education, and empathy scores vary significantly for certain medical conditions.

Objective

- This study aimed to determine the empathy levels displayed by Canadian paramedic students towards patients with various medical conditions.
- We hypothesized that across certain medical conditions, patients are not regarded with the same levels of empathy.

Methods

- This was a cross-sectional survey study of a convenience sample of first and second year paramedic students at Fanshawe College, Ontario, Canada.
- Ethics approval was received from Fanshawe College REB.
- The Medical Condition Regard Scale (MCRS) was used to measure empathy levels across five medical conditions: physical disability, intellectual disability, suicide attempt, mental health emergency, and substance abuse.
- Free-text fields allowed respondents to share their views on empathy

Results

- 43 students participated in the study; 27 males and 15 females (1 unknown).
- Substance abuse had the lowest mean empathy score (42.88, SD±10.62) *(Table 1. & Fig. 1)*
- Physical disability had the highest mean empathy score (53.0, SD±7.22)
- Females demonstrated a higher mean empathy score of 266.40 (SD±29.99) *(Fig. 2)* and higher mean scores across four of the five medical conditions.
- First years had a higher mean score compared to second years.
- There were no significant differences in scores between age groups.

Table 1. Mean Medical Condition Regard Scale scores for each medical condition

Medical condition	Mean	SD
Intellectual Disability	50.42	8.73
Physical Disability	53.00	7.22
Suicide Attempt	49.47	7.75
Substance Abuse	42.88	10.62
Mental Health Emergency	49.58	10.02

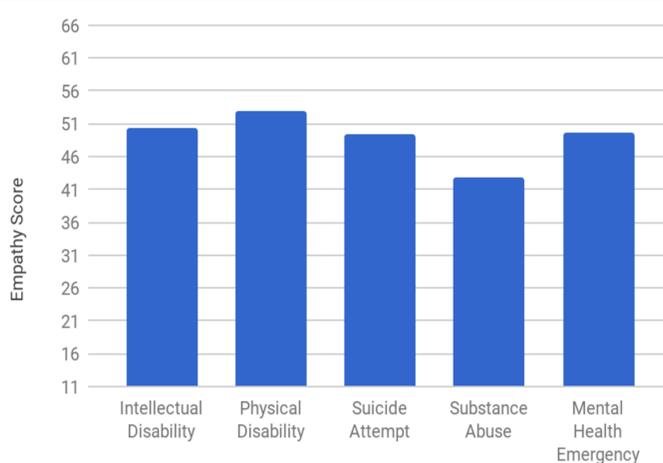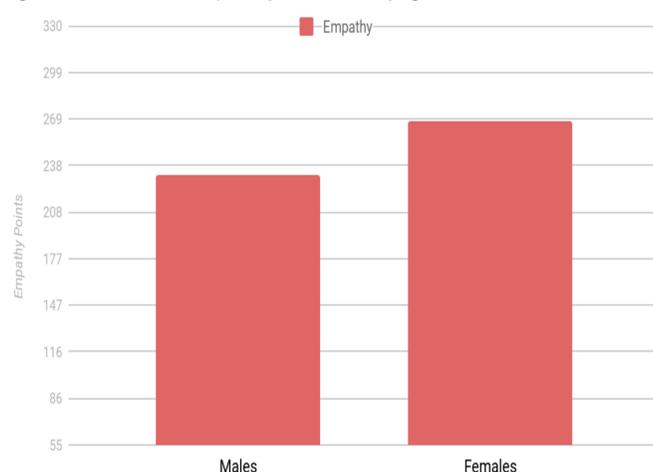Figure 1. Mean empathy scores across medical conditions

Figure 2. Mean empathy scores by gender

Results (cont.)

- A total of 37 respondents (86%) indicated that more empathy training was required in the program.
- Suggestions to improve empathy training included increasing high-fidelity simulation, inviting guest speakers, and undertaking more mental health service placements.
- A selection of quotes from respondents, of interest to the research question, were selected, and are outlined below *(Fig. 3)*

Figure 3. Selected free-texts responses from respondents (aggregated)

> *"…include holistic/biopsychosocial views of health…"*
>
> *"…LTC [long-term care] placements only made people feel less empathy for the elderly patients…"*
>
> *"…you can't teach empathy…"*

Conclusion

- Paramedic students demonstrated varying levels of empathy toward certain medical conditions.
- Male students are less empathetic than their female peers, and second year students are less empathetic than first years.
- These results are consistent with existing findings in Australian paramedic students.
- Our results suggest that paramedic students may benefit from focused empathy education and training, as self-reported by survey respondents.
- Students have mixed ideas (Figure 3) on the empathy training required in order to understand and improve empathy towards patients, but they do identify a definite need.
- Integration of empathy education into the paramedic curriculum could prove beneficial, although the exact type of education, duration, delivery method and curriculum warrants further research.