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Self-reported empathy levels in undergraduate occupational therapy students.

Abstract

Aim To determine if students in four different years of study in occupational therapy at an Australian university differed in self-reported levels of empathy.

Background Establishing an empathetic therapeutic relationship in collaboration with one’s clients is a valued health professional competency. Empathy is therefore of interest in occupational therapy practice and student education. There is limited literature on empathy levels in occupational therapists and/or students.

Method Occupational therapy students from all undergraduate year levels (n=222) were invited to complete the Jefferson Physician Scale of Empathy (JSPE). Fifty-five students returned the surveys. Descriptive statistics including frequency distributions and means were calculated from the survey results.

Results Overall self-reported empathy levels in novice learners did not significantly differ from advanced learners (U = 299.000, p = .985). These results may be affected by non-response bias. The year level groups did not differ significantly on JSPE Factors Perspective Taking (U = 297.500, p = .962), Compassionate Care (U = 264.000, p = .493), or Standing in the Patient’s Shoes (U = 206.000, p = .072), however there were significant differences between year level groups on five individual JSPE items.

Conclusion The results of the present study may be due to progressive development of student understanding of particular aspects of empathy during undergraduate education and clinical practice experience.