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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.