

Special Smiles Project – Has it changed students' perspectives on disability?

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Background

One of the objectives of the Service Learning (SL) pedagogical strategy is to promote students which are more socially engaged. The Faculty of Dental Medicine of Universidade Católica Portuguesa (FDMUCP) has embedded this strategy in the training of dentists. Since 2020 the project Special Smiles has been treating patients with different types of disabilities. In a Municipal funded project, which has provided dental care to patients from 7 partner institutions ranging from homes for people with mental disability to associations of visually and ear impaired individuals.

Aims & Objectives

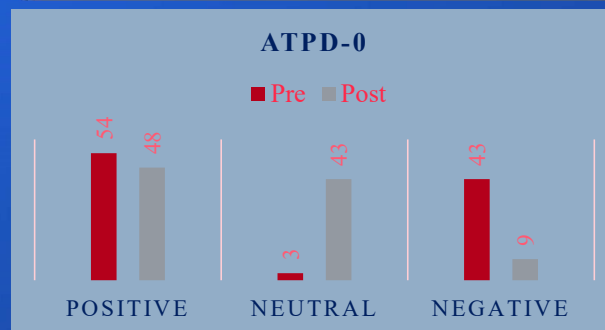
To ascertain the impact of the Special Smiles project on the student's attitude towards disability.
Furthermore, to assess the perceived impact of the project on the institutions participating in the project.

Materials & Methods

A questionnaire developed by Yuk, 1986 (ATDP-0), validated for dental students by Phadraig and co-workers (2014) and translated and validated for Portuguese by Martins and Ribeiro (2007) was used. The questionnaire consists of 20 question with scores from -3 to 3. A sum from all questions provides a final score.
Fifty students answered the questionnaire before and after participating in the project. A questionnaire was also applied to the participating institutions in order ascertain the perceived impact of the project.

Results

In the pretest results the majority (54%) of students show a positive attitude towards people with disability with only 3% of students being neutral. Upon completion of the post-experience questionnaire, there was a slight (5%) decrease in students presenting a positive attitude towards people with disability, but a significant increase in students with a neutral attitude towards people with disability and a similar decrease in the students with a negative attitude.



References

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Discussion

In similar studies performed by Phadraig et al 2015 it has been found that attitude towards people with disability doesn't significantly change after having the opportunity to see special needs patients during the training. However, having this experience presented as SL enables tutors to promote student reflection on the opportunities for self-growth (DeLucia&Davis, 2009). Overall improvement of attitudes towards people with disability was achieved mainly in the increase of students which change their attitude from a negative to a neutral one. Future studies should enable to verify if these results are maintained over time (one year after graduating).

Conclusions

Service Learning is a powerful strategy and proved to be instrumental in improving the attitudes of dental students towards people with disability. Opportunity to treat patients with disability is not by itself sufficient to change attitudes and reflexion opportunities proposed by SL approaches essential for best results.

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