A pilot study on virtual patients: Understanding student experiences to facilitate learning

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Virtual patients are web-based interactive clinical scenarios and are being increasingly used globally in undergraduate medical training. Despite its value, virtual patients are not been used widely in the local context. Therefore this pilot study examined student experiences of using a virtual patient with the aim of identifying student acceptance and the possibility of integration into the medical curriculum to enhance student learning.

A virtual patient having a linear navigation design was developed in the virtual learning environment (VLE) of the faculty paying meticulous attention to instructional designing, medical education principles and content coverage. 12 immediate graduates of the faculty were recruited to the study following informed consent as they have completed the undergraduate curriculum and in a position to provide meaningful comments on the activity concerned. They were given online access to the virtual patient and were requested to complete the case study followed by an 18 item survey designed on the same platform. The results were analysed using MS Excel.

All study participants unanimously agreed to the usefulness of virtual patients for medical undergraduate training. It was identified as a means to practice clinical cases, preparation for clinical training in the ward setting, a guide for assessments, to understand practical aspects of patient management and a means to refresh the knowledge. The most useful features were the multiple choice questions integrated to the case study, immediate feedback and learning points. The essay type questions which require text input were discouraged. It was suggested to impose a time limitation as it mimics the reality and to include more practical aspects.

The positive student experiences associated with the interaction of the virtual patient during this study highlighted the need for such innovative methods to facilitate medical undergraduate learning. However, a larger study needs to be conducted on different virtual patient designs before adopting them for student learning.

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