

A Program Design of an Experiential Course to Teach Empathic Communication Skills: Animal-Assisted Learning

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STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM: This poster outlines a teaching program design that is an experientially-based **course involving the use of horses** to improve empathic communication skills among medical students. This animal-assisted course is meant to use horsemanship groundwork exercises as a method of teaching the importance of nonverbal language and body language techniques to help medical students in their interpersonal relationships as healthcare practitioners. Medical educators at all levels recognize the importance of formal training in basic clinical skills which include communication and interpersonal skills. In 2004, the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), which is co-sponsored by the National Board of Medical Examiners and the Federation of State Medical Boards, added to its requirements for licensure a clinical skills examination which is specifically designed to measure clinical skills required for entry into post graduate training. While medical school institutions have implemented clinical skills training into their curriculum they continue to explore better methods to teach empathic communication skills. Studies document the importance of refined communication skills for improved patient-doctor relationships and health outcomes. However, focus on the physician's verbal communication skills alone is insufficient. It is through nonverbal communication that the ability to interpret patient cues and adapt communication to individual patients, further enhances the doctor-patient relationship. Because nonverbal communication may not be under conscious control, it cannot be taught using didactic approaches alone. A course in communication needs to help the student understand his/her own interpersonal style and learn to apply it flexibly to the needs of different patients and situations. Several medical school institutions¹ have already developed and successfully implemented a program design for such a communication course but have not collected any outcome measures demonstrating improvements in communications skills, particularly non-verbal communication.

SUBJECTS USED: The intended enrollment number is 5 to 10 medical students from UMDNJ-RWJ Medical School. No riding or horse experience would be necessary to participate in this course.

PROCEDURE: This two week course (4 days/week) will consist of 2 ½ to 3-hour sessions. The course program will also include two weekly didactic sessions in addition to two weekly session of horsemanship exercises. Students will be asked to complete a study battery. Students will complete the Nonverbal Inventory (Ferrero-Paluzzi & Grunwald, 2005). This measure will serve as the primary outcome measure. It was developed specifically to be used in medical settings and universities in order to test the sensitivity of subjects' nonverbal decoding skills. They will also complete the Nonverbal Immediacy Scale-Self Report (NIS-S), which will be a self-reported assessment of nonverbal skills. This will be completed at the start of the course and again after course completion. Additionally students will be required to partake in two mock interview sessions which will be held during the first and last sessions. Patient-centered language and non-verbal interactions will be coded using a modified rating system. The coding will target constructs that will be addressed in the course (i.e. warmth, genuineness, empathy) and will include a behavioral count and "transitions" coding category.

RESULTS: This abstract is a proposed outline of a program design and proposed evaluation of effectiveness. Therefore, data has not yet been gathered. It is hypothesized, however, that this program will result in improved nonverbal communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS: Evidence supports the notion that nonverbal communication is an essential aspect of the doctor-patient relationship and improved patient satisfaction and treatment outcomes. There appears to be evidence that an experientially-based component that includes an equine-assisted element will prove efficacious.

Figure 1. This course will teach students to:

- ✓ Become aware of subtleties of nonverbal and verbal communication
- ✓ Improve attention, mindfulness and focused abilities
- ✓ Become aware of incongruence of intention vs. behavior
- ✓ Identify and respect boundaries in ourselves and others
- ✓ Recognize the nature of projection and transference
- ✓ Confront insecurities and develop confidence
- ✓ Adjust to the relativity of time, expand the moment
- ✓ Cope with stress



¹ University of Arizona (Alan Hamilton, M.D., 2001), Stanford University (Beverly Kane, M.D., 2005), University of Oklahoma (2007)