

Cheating By Physician Assistant Students On Patient Encounter Logs

Abstract

Introduction: Medical educators commonly rely on patient encounter logs to evaluate the adequacy of students' clinical encounters. Anecdotally, most training programs that utilize patient logging systems encounter problems with student falsification of entries. However, despite a large body of work on medical student cheating, there has been little effort to measure falsification of log entries during clinical rotations in any medical or allied health field. This project aims to survey a national cross-section of recent physician assistant (PA) graduates regarding cheating on patient encounter logs in order to estimate the magnitude of the problem. Additionally, information about the nature of logging systems used during clinical rotations was gathered in order to try to identify factors associated with cheating. The project was supported by a PAEA small grant.

Methods: After obtaining local IRB approval, an anonymous paper survey was distributed in mid-March 2007 to a random sample of 1800 recently graduated PA students, utilizing mailing labels obtained through the AAPA "Survey Assistance Program." The survey was also available in web-based format. A single reminder was sent, and the survey closed after 6 weeks. SPSS 15.0 was utilized for data analysis.

Results: The response rate was 31%. The vast majority of respondents reported completing some type of patient encounter log during clinical rotations (94%), and of those who had completed logs, 63% reported that patient encounter logs were tied to grades or some other measure of student progress. 57% self-reported some degree of cheating behavior themselves, and 90% of respondents reported cheating behavior in their classmates. Of those who self-reported cheating, 28% acknowledged occasionally (between 5 and 50 times) or regularly (over 50 times) falsifying log entries.

Characteristics associated significantly with increased cheating include: increasing amount of time required create a single entry in the patient logging system, younger student age, absence of an honor code, and absence of any system for verifying accuracy of student logs.

Discussion/Conclusions: Cheating on patient encounter logs during clinical training of PA students is clearly a significant problem, but one that schools may not be aware of, since almost half (46%) of recent graduates reported their program did not even try to check the accuracy of logs. As medical educators, we need to take measures to address this issue. Such measures might include decreasing time burdens imposed by logging systems, implementing honor code systems, improving methods for verifying logging data, and possibly removing direct links between log entries and student grades.