



MEDEX Northwest Physician Assistant Program
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Biopsychosocial Concerns in Primary Care: Student, Patient and Physician Attitudes

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Purpose: Patients approach primary care providers with many biopsychosocial issues. Do the beliefs of patients, students and experienced providers align regarding which issues are appropriate to raise within primary care settings? For example, patients might believe it inappropriate to discuss divorce while clinicians might regard divorce as important to obtaining a full patient history. When the beliefs of providers and patients differ, quality of care and patient satisfaction may diminish. This is the first study to compare the viewpoints of physician assistant (PA) students, medical students, patients and physicians.

Methods: The Washington Primary Care (WPC) inventory assesses attitudes toward the appropriateness of raising 40 separate biopsychosocial concerns in primary care encounters. These include psychosocial (e.g., loneliness), physical (e.g., weight gain) and familial (e.g., abuse) concerns. Data was collected between 2003-2005 from: PA students in a single program (n=215); medical students from the same institution (n=487); patients in primary care practices (n=910); and primary care physicians (n=59). Students completed the WPC at matriculation; patient and physician data was collected during a patient-physician communication study.

Results: Primary care physicians were more accepting of psychosocial topics ($x=3.35$) than were patients ($x=2.54$ $p<.001$) and students (PA, $x=2.49$, medical, $x=2.32$, each $P<.001$). Physicians and patients responded similarly regarding physical concerns

($x=4.51, 4.54, P=ns$), but each described primary care more broadly than students (PA, $x=4.16$, medical, $x=4.07$, each $P<.001$). Patients ($x=4.15$), PA students ($x=4.07$) and medical students ($x=3.83$) were less inclusive regarding familial concerns than physicians ($x=4.61$, all $P<.001$).

Conclusions: Experienced physicians are more willing than students or patients to address biopsychosocial issues in clinical encounters. Physicians and patients share similar attitudes regarding physical concerns, but broader attitudes than either student group. Discrepancies between the beliefs of patients, students and providers have implications for training, patient education and selection for programs emphasizing primary care.

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