

PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS TOWARDS PEOPLE WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES IN HOSPITALS IN THE WESTERN CAPE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction:

The attitude of health professionals has a direct influence on quality of care. The greatest problem that persons with physical disabilities experience at hospitals is that the health professionals attending to them exhibit inappropriate attitudes and behaviors. Hence, the aim is to determine the perceptions and attitudes of health professionals towards persons with disabilities at the five selected hospitals in the Western Cape.

Methodology:

This was a descriptive cross sectional study that used quantitative methods to collect data using a self-administered, validated questionnaire. The sample consisted of 107 conveniently selected health professionals from five hospitals in the Western Cape.

Results:

Seventy-five percent of health professionals demonstrated positive perceptions and attitudes towards persons with disabilities in hospitals.

Conclusion:

Health professionals have positive perceptions and attitudes towards persons with disabilities who were attending hospital.

Key Words: attitude, perception, disabled, health professionals

Introduction

In South Africa, 1.2% of the national and provincial population are physically disabled (Veltman, Steward, Tardif & Branigan, 2001). Some are dependent on the health care system, which means that health professionals play a major role in their lives, with their attitudes having a direct influence on the quality of care provided. When health professionals interact with persons with disabilities,

attitudes and feelings are reflected in the interaction. In general, the attitudes of health care professionals can influence how patients with disabilities feel about themselves as well as their progression with rehabilitation. Thus, attitudes of health professionals who work with people with disabilities influence the outcome of their treatment and rehabilitation. Persons with disabilities are often described as overly sensitive, self pitying,

helpless, dependent, easily discouraged, non-ambitious and expecting special treatment from others (Yuker, 1970). The perception and behavior of health professionals affects whether or not their attitudes towards the persons with physical disabilities are negative or positive (Al-Abdulwahab & Al-Gain, 2003).

Most allied health professionals (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, audioterapists, radiographers) and health professionals (nurses, doctors and pharmacists) have some contact with clients who present with physical disabilities. Various studies have determined the attitudes of health professionals as they relate to people with disabilities. According to Stachura and Garven (2003) and Al-Abdulwahab & Al-Gain (2003), occupational therapists, nurses and dentists showed a positive attitude towards those persons with physical disability. The authors further suggested that the reason for the positive attitude of occupational therapists may be based on the humanistic and holistic philosophy embedded in their curriculum. Al-Abdulwahab and Al-Gain (2003) also identified that occupational therapists, nurses and dentists had a positive attitude towards those persons with physical disabilities.

Persons with physical disabilities are more vulnerable to health problems due to their disabilities. Longorio and Marini (2006) and Wiman, Helander and Westland (2002) found that persons with disabilities have different medical needs from able bodied persons. These authors identified the following needs for people with disabilities that are more for able bodied people: preventative, curative, rehabilitative as well as assistive devices and counseling to obtain adequate health care services. Veltman et al. (2001) states that the greatest problem that persons with physical disabilities experience when accessing medical services at hospitals is that the health professionals attending to them exhibit unsuitable attitudes and behaviors, such as refusing to treat persons with physical disabilities. Research and anecdotal evidence suggests that the relationship between professionals and disabled people are varied but can be experienced as dehumanizing and abusive by disabled people (Swain and French, 2001). Research has shown that patients care more about the quality of their everyday interactions with health

professionals than about how the service is organized. According to Coulter (2005), patients in the United Kingdom reported that they want primary health care professionals who are interested and sympathetic and who involve them in decision-making. In this study, clients valued rapport issues more than therapists' technical skills. Caljouw, van Beuzekom & Boer (2008) argued that the disabled patients wanted health care professionals to give them sufficient time and attention and to provide advice on health promotion and self-care.

Poor communication between service providers and clients has been a major complaint from people with disabilities. Bowers et al. (1996) reported that clients identified communication with service providers as an important issue and that they were not given the opportunity to express their views. In this study the clients reported that service providers were not ready to listen and to consider the people with disabilities' knowledge, experience with and wisdom regarding their disability. Similarly, Swain and French (2001) reported that disabled persons with knowledge of their entitlements were frequently viewed as 'grabbing', demanding or fussy.

The service providers' attitude towards their clients is a major issue that clients talk about when they report their experiences of health care. According to Crisp et al. (2000) Australian disabled people perceived the attitudes of rehabilitation personnel as ineffectual and they reported concern about a lack of quality in their relationships with health and rehabilitation personnel. Bowers et al. (1996) reported that physically disabled persons expressed a high level of sensitivity to what they perceived as the unspoken cues that were conveyed by health care professionals in reaction to their physical presence. These included distancing behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, touching only when required by direct bodywork and sitting at a distance beyond what is perceived as appropriate for social interaction. However, Morris et al. (2007) reported contrasting findings whereby patients and careers praised the physiotherapists' positive attitude and reported high levels of commitment of the latter.

Literature generally concludes that the relationship between persons with physical disabilities and

health professionals affects the quality of treatment that persons with physical disabilities receive, as well as the response to treatment from people with disabilities towards the health professionals. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the perceptions and attitudes of health professionals towards persons with physical disability at hospitals in the Western Cape.

Methodology

The study utilized a descriptive, cross-sectional study design using quantitative methods of data collection. The study was conducted at five hospitals in the Western Cape, namely, Hospital A (tertiary hospital), Hospital B (primary hospital), Hospital C, D and E (secondary hospitals). All of the health professionals working in these hospitals were willing to participate in the study. Hundred and seven participants were conveniently selected to participate in the study. These included physiotherapists, occupational therapists, doctors, nurses, speech therapists, dieticians and radiographers. The inclusion criteria for this study were those participants who had had experience consulting clients who presented with physical disabilities. Some of the participants did not meet this criterion when analysis was done and the total number of participants who qualified was 107.

Data was collected using the Interaction with Disabled Persons (IDP) Questionnaire which is a self-administered questionnaire. It consisted of closed-ended questions that were used to collect data that would meet the objectives of the study (Gething & Wheeler, 1992). Section A of the questionnaire dealt with demographic information and Section B asked questions relating to perceptions and attitudes of health professionals. Perceptions and attitudes were measured using a four-point Likert scale.

Consent and ethical clearance was obtained from

the University of the Western Cape, the various departments at the five hospitals and the superintendents of each hospital. Informed written consent was obtained from the participants prior to participation in the study. They took part freely and were informed of their right to withdraw from the process at any stage of the project. Confidentiality and anonymity of the information provided was assured with pseudonyms to be used when the results were published. Data was analysed using Epi-Info. Descriptive statistics was used to report the findings.

RESULTS

One hundred and seventy five questionnaires were distributed and returned however, 68 had to be discarded based on limited information provided. Thus 107 participants (61%) formed the study sample. Of the 107 participants used for the results, 35.5% of the data was obtained from Hospital A, 19.6% from Hospital B, 18.7% Hospital D, 15.9% from Hospital C and 10.3% from Hospital E. The demographic information of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

The majority of the participants (51%) were between 18-29 years. In addition more that 50% of the health professionals had been qualified for less than one year. Table 2 highlights the perceptions and attitudes of health care professionals working in different hospitals in the Western Cape.

Table 1 Demographic information

Variable	N (%)
Gender	
Male	16 (%)
Female	91 (%)
Age	
18-29 years	55 (%)
30-39 years	28 (%)
40-49 years	16 (%)
50-59 years	8 (%)
Years qualified	
0 years	58 (%)
1-5 years	9 (%)
5-15 years	31 (%)
15-25 years	9 (%)

Table 2 Perceptions and attitudes of health care professionals

Item	Agree	Strongly Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Helping people with disabilities	41%	56%	3%	0
Health professionals' understanding of Disability	69%	26%	8%	0
Burden of not facing disability	51%	26%	18%	5%
Health professionals cannot help starring at PWPD	9%	1%	55%	35%
Health professionals admire the coping abilities of PWPD	54%	45%	1%	0
Health Professionals hurt when observing PWPD struggling to do an activity	51%	17%	22%	6%
Health professionals thoughts of having a disability	59%	26%	14%	1%
Ignorance of health professionals towards people with physical disabilities	8%	0%	49%	43%
Health professionals when people with physical disability visit them frequently	53%	33%	11%	3%
Health professionals reminded of vulnerability when in contact with PWPD	53%	20%	23%	4%
Health professionals ignore disability when treating PWPD	45%	15%	29%	11%
Health professionals feel uncomfortable when in contact with PWPD	12%	1%	57%	30%
Health professionals are unsure when in contact with PWPD	11%	1%	59%	29%
Health professionals do not pity PWPD	49%	18%	28%	6%
Health professionals feel overwhelmed with discomfort when in contact with PWPD	23%	1%	46%	30%
Health professionals are afraid to look PWPD in their faces	45%	1%	54%	40%
Health professionals dread the thought of having a disability	42%	15%	32%	11%
Health professionals feel frustrated when they are unable to help PWPD	42%	15%	32%	11%
Health professionals spend less time with PWPD during consultation	8%	1%	52%	39%
Health professionals are at ease when discussing disability issues with PWPD	54%	11%	29%	6%

Figure 1 presents the percentage of health professionals who showed positive and negative emotions towards persons with physical disabilities. Eighty percent of occupational therapists showed positive emotions towards their patients, which was the highest percentage for all health professionals and 20% had negative emotions.

have a better understanding of the patients' needs.

The results indicated that even though health professionals have been qualified for many years and have many years of experience in managing patients with physical disabilities, they did not necessarily have more positive attitudes towards

Figure 1: Perceptions and attitudes of health professionals



Generally health professionals within the five hospitals showed positive perceptions and attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities. There were significant differences in each health professional's emotions towards persons with physical disabilities. An average of 78% of the health professionals had a positive attitude towards people with disabilities and an average of 22% had a negative attitude.

Discussion

Some of the participants in this study were still undergoing training and the majority of their ages ranged between 18-29 years old. This shows that the majority had limited experience treating patients with physical disabilities. It is also clear that the less experience participants (16%) had in managing persons with physical disabilities, the more time (45-60 minutes) they spent with their clients as more experienced professionals only 11% spend between 45 and 60 minutes. This may be so that they would

them (76%). Less experienced health professionals who are still undergoing training showed that they spent more time and have positive attitude during management of people with disabilities. Budisch (2004) says that even though health professionals have many years of experience they do not necessarily have positive attitudes towards patients with physical disabilities.

This study found that health professionals had a good background of disability management as they confirmed that in their training they were taught to treat patients with disabilities equally, professionally and holistically. Hence, the majority of them (76%) showed positive perceptions and attitudes towards patients with physical disabilities on initial contact.

Consultation with patients requires one to have patience and time to address the needs of an individual. Less experienced health professionals in this study spent more time during management of patients with disabilities compared to health professionals who had more experience. This time

constraint for the management of clients is due to patient load and staff shortages in hospitals. Conway (1995) says that even though nurses were trained to spend more time with their clients they still do not spend more time with the clients, especially if they are understaffed.

This study proved that regardless of the experience that health professionals have in managing clients with physical disabilities, the majority (75%) have positive perceptions and attitudes towards these patients and the minority (25%) have negative perceptions and attitudes towards them.

Conclusion

Health professionals in different professions showed little difference in their perceptions and attitudes towards persons with physical disabilities and all health professionals demonstrated much greater positive perceptions and attitudes towards patients with physical disabilities during management.

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