EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE HEALTHCARE SETTINGS: ARE THE GRADUATES READY FOR IT?

Aelita Skarbalienė[*]

Egidijus Skarbalius[**]

Lina Gedrimė[***]

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Abstract. *Social competences, and particularly good communication skills, are becoming increasingly important in contemporary professional environment. Although studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of different training strategies, many Lithuanian higher education institutions have not yet incorporated the training of communication skills in their curriculum. The aim of this paper is to assess the communication skills of healthcare students in Lithuania and indicate the benefits of their development. Students graduating from a variety of health sciences study programs (N=118) self-assessed their communication skills. The results show that participants their communication skills as average with some potential strengths, i.e. ability to talk about things of interest to every person in conversation, recognizing how others are reacting to what is being said, not interrupting others in the conversation, understanding other people's feelings, ability to praise the person, etc. On the other hand, some skills and abilities need to be improved, i.e. expressing opinion in a non-aggressive manner, as well as thinking and speaking clearly, while being emotional.*

Keywords: *communication skills, healthcare, communication skills self-assessment, higher education, Lithuania.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Social competences, and particularly good communication skills, are becoming increasingly important in contemporary professional environment. Consequently, assessment and development of social competences including communication skills has also become important in higher education of healthcare (Cömert et al., 2016). It is argued that advantages of effective communication cannot be emphasized enough (Choudhary and Gupta, 2015) and it must be noted that excellent communication

[*] Aelita Skarbalienė, Klaipeda University, Lithuania Business University of Applied Sciences, H. Manto 84, 92294, Klaipeda, Lithuania, aelita.skarbaliene@gmail.com

[**] Egidijus Skarbalius, Klaipeda University, Klaipeda, Lithuania, e.skarbalius@gmail.com

[***] Lina Gedrimė, Klaipeda University, Republic Klaipeda Hospital, Klaipeda State University of Applied Sciences, Klaipeda, Lithuania, linagedrimaite@gmail.com

is also expected by the patients (Hobgood et al., 2002). Despite the emphasis on the need of developing good communication skills, there are studies that report the lack of social and communication competencies in young professionals. Employers looking for young professionals claim that the recent graduates do not meet the communication skills requirements, with special emphasis on the lack of fluecy of speech. Porter (2000) reports on the lack of basic communication skills, i.e. speaking and listening, while Mehta & Mehta (2007) also agree that graduates do not have good communication skills which prevents them from communicating their otherwise excellent professional knowledge and skills.

Despite the highlighted importance of social and communication skills in contemporary healthcare practice, many Lithuanian higher education institutions have not incorporated the training of communication skills in their curricula. Therefore, the authors hypothesise, that graduating students lack communication skills.

The aim of the research is to assess the communication skills of graduating students who were not offered any communication courses as part of their study curricula and to indicate the theoretical benefits of developing communication skills of healthcare students.

2. THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

Many researchers argue the importance of healthcare professionals having well-developed communication skills: to speak articulately and fluently, to use patient-friendly terminology, and to be able to listen to the patient (Cote and Leclere, 2000).

The research on the communication of the nursing professionals described communication by managing interpersonal relationships, ability to send a clear message, honesty and professionalism (Pereira and Puggina, 2017). Effective communication also includes teamwork and collaboration, intercultural communication, critical thinking, using a range of communication techniques for expressing one's ideas and for understanding others (Koenig, 2011; Lum et al., 2016). Likewise, communication is not limited to verbal skills only, i.e. speaking, but it encompasses many non-verbal aspects, i.e. active listening, body language, face expressions, getting feedback, emotional interaction, etc. (Hobgood et al., 2002).

Good communication skills help build respectful and effective relationships with patients, their relatives, and colleagues. It also helps to show personal leadership, resolve conflicts, and motivate others (Hobgood et al., 2002).

Communication is essential to help patients understand their health situation, problems, and treatment plan (Silva, 2015). A person with strong communication skills can manage any unpredictable professional situations (Pereira and Puggina, 2017). George, Rahmatinick, and Ramos (2018) found the evidence that patient-centred communication develops a holistic relationship with the patients. Positive correlation was revealed between effective communication of healthcare professionals and the improved health status of the patients (Oh et al., 2001; Laidlaw et al., 2001; Alotaibi, 2018).

The good communication skills of healthcare professionals have also been shown to relate to better patient enablement (Pawlikowska et al., 2010). Patient enablement can be defined as the extent to which

a patient is capable of understanding and coping with his or her health issues. This concept is linked to a number of health outcomes, such as self-management of chronic diseases and quality of life (Hudon et al, 2011). It is an indicator of the self-efficacy benefits of consulting a health care provider and is expected to be associated with behaviours like treatment adherence and self-care and indicators of quality of care (Mercer and Howie, 2006). Good communication can contribute to establishing trust with the healthcare professional as well. (Hobgood et al., 2002). It was also found that patient satisfaction with the quality of health care is increasing, depending on the amount and quality of information received. However, McGuire et al. (1986) found that nine out of ten doctors were not interested in the information needs of patients and their relatives. They did not encourage patients to ask questions and did not include patients in the decisions on the treatment plan, as well as avoided providing feedback (McGuire et al., 1986). The findings by Wittenberg et al. (2016) demonstrate that lack of preparation to work as a team is a barrier for nurses in communicating about goals of treatment. Park (2017) argued that it is not only doctors, but also nurses, who need to be concerned about their communication skills and, therefore, should be also included in communication skills courses and training programs.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS DURING THE PROCESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Since good communication is extremely important for healthcare professionals, education and development of various communication skills was the matter of concern for years. As early as in 1974 Bochner and Kelly argued that learners, who have achieved excellence in interpersonal communication, should be able to set and achieve learning goals, collaborate with others, and adapt to situational changes better. Contemporary education theories and research prove that communication skills can be successfully developed, despite the age of the learner (Hobgood, 2002). There are many studies, supporting the benefits and results of developing communication skills during higher education. For example, Main et al. (2010) believe that communication competences should be developed during the undergraduate studies. The need for developing better communication skills for healthcare professionals is also well recognized (Hausberg et al., 2012) and the opinion that such courses should be mandatory for health professionals has been voiced (Pereira and Puggina, 2017; Choudhary and Gupta, 2015).

Choudhary and Gupta (2015) studied the effects of training on basic communication skills and effective techniques of patient interviewing. Pre- and post- training assessment was carried out, by using the Standardized Patient Satisfaction Questionnaire (SPSQ). 88% of the study participants agreed on the importance of effective communication for their future practice and were interested in developing their communication skills. Nine out of ten students felt they communicated better after the training session. Overall, the results showed that students had a positive attitude to developing their communication skills. Thus, the authors stress the necessity of introducing communication skills courses in the undergraduate study programmes of medical and healthcare students.

Hausberg et al. (2012) developed and offered communication training "Basics and Practice in Communication Skills". The purpose of the course was to demonstrate

the usefulness of the communication skills in healthcare professional-patient interaction process and to improve communication skills of the training participants. The experimental and the control group participated in the self-assessment and the expert assessment of the communication skills before and after the training. The survey revealed the significant increase in the quality of communication skills of those students who participated in the "Basics and Practice in Communication Skills" course. This was proved both by self-assessment and expert rating.

Bachmann et al. (2013) developed the "Interdisciplinary communication skills program", which was tested with healthcare students (n=80), involving the simulated patients. The effect of the course was evaluated by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Students who took part in the study provided a very positive assessment of the course and highlighted its most important outcomes, i.e. development of the feedback skills, cross-disciplinary approach, and an increase in self-confidence.

Vaglum (2017) described the experience of implementation of extensive communication training from the first to the last semester. The training involved theoretical part - lectures on communication skills and the practical part - with patients-volunteers and professional actors playing the role of patients. Both students and teachers assessed this practice positively.

Communication skills of students are especially important in the context of other professional and leadership competencies. Communication skills have been found to influence the development of stronger leadership competencies during the internship. (Skarbalienė, 2015).

Despite considerable attention to the development of communication skills, Ambigapathy and Aniswal (2005) state that, in general, students' communication skills have been gradually decreasing over the years. Wagner et al. (2018) notice that although communication is an essential part of the nursing process, nurses have little, or no formal education in how to best communicate with patients and their family members. Hall et al. (2018) propose further development of communication skills, as to support the implementation of patient safety and delivery of high-quality care.

Thus, the importance of communication skills for healthcare professionals has been particularly highlighted for more than a decade. In recent years, the strategies have been considered for developing education and training in communication skills. However, authors of this article suggest that, in order to increase and develop interpersonal communication skills effectively, the current level of communication skills must be assessed and students' strengths and weaknesses taken into account, when drawing up the curriculum. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to assess the communication skills of healthcare students.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Interpersonal Communication Skills Inventory (Learning Dinamics, 2002) was used for students' self-assessment of communication skills. This Interpersonal Communication Skills Inventory was designed to self-measure the level of communication competences in the main areas of the concept: speaking skills, active listening, giving/getting feedback, and the skills of emotional interactions with others. Thus, the inventory consists of four scales, each section containing ten questions. By answering seldom, sometimes or usually, the participants can get from 0 to 3 points

Table 1. The results of the reliability analysis

Scales	Cronbach's Alpha
Overall scale	0.864
Speaking skills	0.853
Listening skills	0.910
Giving/getting feedback skills	0.780
Emotional interaction skills	0.791

(using the scoring key) and can collect up to 30 points on each scale. The results are interpreted as follows:

- 1 to 15 - communication skills need much development and improvement;
- 16 to 21 - communication skills need more attention and light improvement;
- 22 to 30 - potentially strong communication skills.

The results of the reliability analysis were acceptable (Table 1).

In spring 2018, the questionnaires were administered to 118 students graduating from healthcare studies (nursing, public health, physiotherapy) at an institution of higher education in Lithuania. 64% of respondents were female (n=76) and 36% male (n=42). The participants had no formal training in communication skills as part of their study curricula and no previous work experience in healthcare. The mean age of respondents was 23.6 years.

5. RESULTS

The overall average of students' communication skills is 16.0, whereas the skills of sending a clear message are the strongest and sending and getting the feedback is the weakest (Figure 1). These ranges indicate the need for more consistent attention.

By analysing individual components of communication skills separately, the advantages and disadvantages of students' communication can be identified. The mean

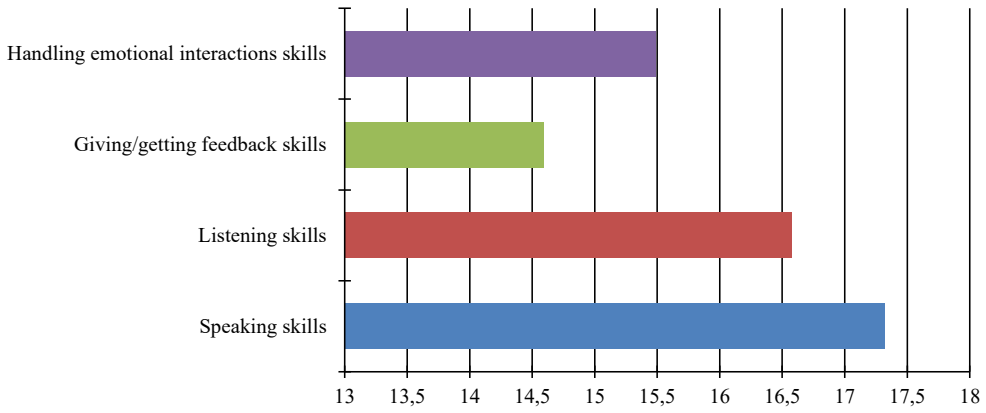

Figure 1. Self-assessment of students' interpersonal communication skills

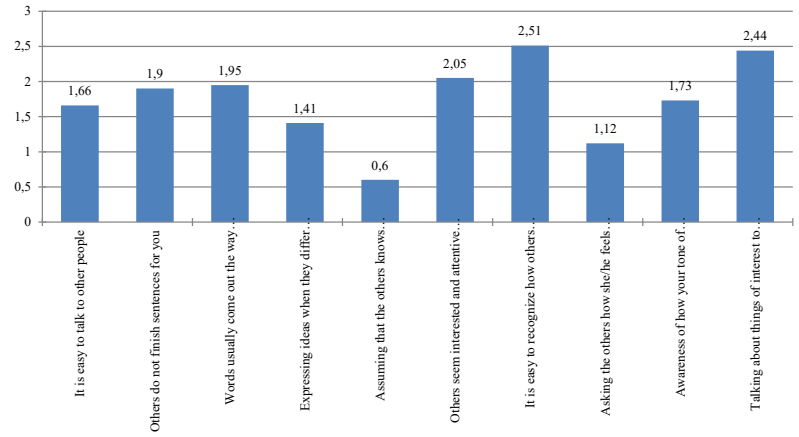

Figure 2. Self-assessment of students' skills of sending a clear message

value of students' skills of sending a clear message is 1.73 (out of 3) and is rather of medium level. Based on the presented research results (Figure 2), it can be noted that students know how to get others' attention and interest in the conversation, can recognize the reaction to what they are saying, and the words come out the way they expect. Still, sometimes it is not easy to talk to other people when students are trying to explain something.

The analysis of students' listening skills indicate the medium level of these skills with the mean of 1.66 (out of 3). In the conversation, students let other people finish talking, before reacting to what was said; they do ask questions, if they do not understand the issue and try to understand things from the other person's position. Sometimes, in the conversation, students tend to do more talking than the others do. Sometimes, they find themselves not paying enough attention to what is said by another person; they do not have the habit of clarifying what they have heard and find themselves focusing on the facts and details of the conversation, but not on emotional expressions and non-verbal elements (Figure 3).

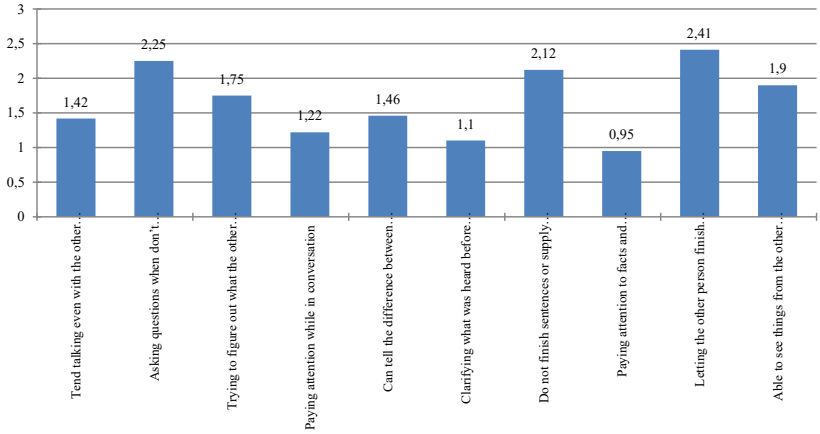

Figure 3. Self-assessment of students' listening skills

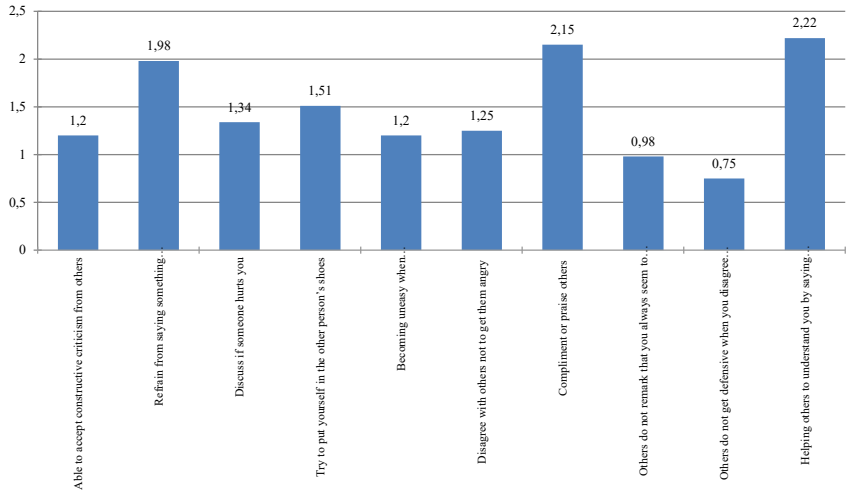

Figure 4. Self-assessment of students' skills of giving and getting feedback

The weakest component of students' communication skills is giving and getting feedback. The item average is 1.46 (out of 3). Students try to put themselves *'in other people shoes'* and try not to say things that can upset others. They also do not find it difficult to compliment or praise other people, but become uneasy when others pay them a compliment. They find it difficult to hear and accept constructive criticism and discuss the situation, if someone hurts their feelings. Students admitted that they seem to think they are always right, which can lead to discussions, which make other participants to become defensive (Figure 4).

Emotional interaction is another communication skill that needs some improvement. The item mean is 1.55 (out of 3). Results show that students apologize if they

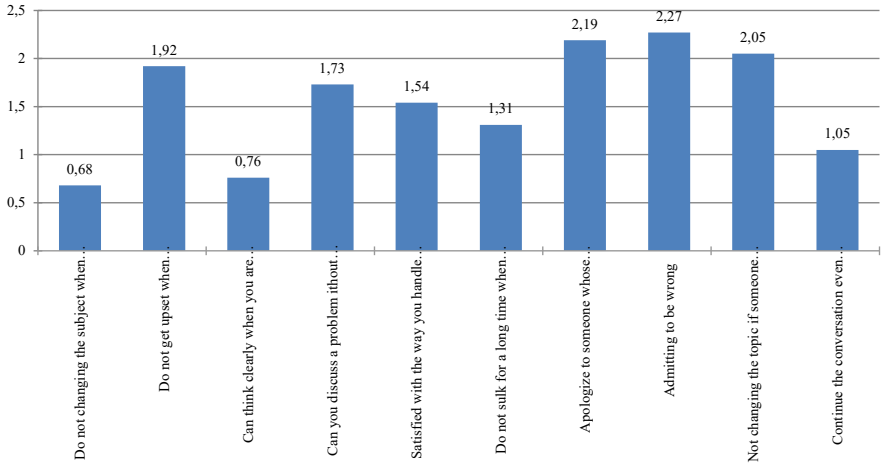

Figure 5. Self-assessment of students' emotional interaction skills

hurt someone's feelings or are wrong about something, but they do not tend to change the topic of the conversation, if it gets emotional. However, students admitted the difficulties of thinking clearly in an emotionally-laden state, feeling the emotional consequences for a long time, if someone upsets them, as well as finding it difficult to continue the conversation, if other people are upset (Figure 5).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the importance of developed communication competencies for delivering effective healthcare has been recognized, the purpose of this research was to indicate the benefits of developing better communication skills for healthcare professionals and assess the current communication skills of graduate students, who had no communication courses in their study curricula.

Effective communication can be taught and communication skills can be developed during higher education, which emphasizes the need to develop the communication competences of healthcare students during their studies (Pereira and Puggina, 2017). The practicing healthcare professionals should be also assisted in improving their professional communication (Hausberg et al., 2012). However, most Lithuanian institutions of higher education do not pay enough attention to developing these skills and do not include communication courses in the curricula of healthcare studies. The problem seems not to be limited to Lithuania only. Other studies also indicate that healthcare professionals have little to no formal education on how to communicate with patients and their family members, as well as lack skills of communicating the goals of treatment care (Wagner et al, 2018; Aniswal, 2005; Wittenberg et al, 2016).

Results of this research show that participants assessed their communication skills as average. Some potential strengths were found, i.e. ability to talk about things of interest to each person, recognizing how others are reacting to what is being said, not interrupting others in the conversation, understanding others peoples' feelings, giving compliments or praises, apologizing and admitting that something wrong has been done.

At the other hand, some skills and abilities need to be improved, i.e. ceasing to assume that the other person understands the speakers' thoughts, paying attention to the emotional aspects of the speakers' voice, expressing opinion properly, thinking and speaking clearly, even when negative emotions arise. These are the aspects associated with the nonverbal communication aspects. Since communication relates to many different skills (listening, voice tone, body language, facial expressions, etc.) (Hobgood et al, 2002), those should be acknowledged, when teaching communication skills.

Since the importance of communication skills for healthcare professionals has been particularly highlighted, some practical suggestions can be offered, based on the research results. Those include:

- Introducing interpersonal communication courses for students of health sciences;
- Encouraging students to use their strengths in communication: listening without interrupting, paying attention to other people's feelings, ability to compliment or praise, as well as to apologize and admit when something wrong was done;

- Encouraging students to participate in the discussions, express their opinions with appropriate reasoning and argumentation, as well as to explain the importance of paying attention to the speakers' voice, and dealing with the difficult emotional conditions.

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UČINKOVITA KOMUNIKACIJA U ZDRAVSTVENOJ DJELATNOSTI: JESU LI DIPLOMIRANI STUDENTI PRIPRAVNI?

Sažetak

Društvene kompetencije, a posebno dobre komunikacijske vještine, postaju sve značajnijima u suvremenom profesionalnom okruženju. Iako su dosadašnje studije pokazale učinkovitost različitih strategija obuke, brojne litvanske institucije visokog obrazovanja još uvijek nisu uključile obuku komunikacijskih vještina u svoje nastavni program. Cilj ovog rada je procijeniti komunikacijske vještine studenata zdravstva u Litvi te ustanoviti koristi od njihovog razvoja. U radu se iznosi samostalna procjena diplomiranih studenata različitih studija iz područja zdravstva (N = 118), koja se odnosi na vlastite komunikacijske vještine. Rezultati pokazuju da sudionici/e istraživanja cijene svoje komunikacijske vještine kao prosječne, s potencijalnim snagama, koje uključuju: sposobnost rasprave o temama od zajedničkog interesa, prepoznavanje kako sugovornici reagiraju na izrečeno, razumijevanja osjećaja sugovornika, sposobnost pohvale sugovornika, itd. S druge strane, potrebno je unaprijediti neke vještine i sposobnosti, kao što su neagresivno iskazivanje svojih stavova te jasno razmišljanje i govor u emocionalnim situacijama.

Ključne riječi: *komunikacijske vještine, zdravstvo, samostalna procjena komunikacijskih vještina, visoko obrazovanje, Litva*