INTRODUCTION

Reflective practice is a learning strategy that involves thinking critically about one’s actions and is a recognised cornerstone of continuing professional development or CPD. With the present climate of accountability, physiotherapists have also embraced the call for evidence-based practice (EBP) and clinical effectiveness to underpin their practice. An essential component of continually developing as a professional and being clinically effective is critical self-appraisal through reflection. The reflective practice module within the undergraduate physiotherapy programme at University of Limerick (UL) is a first within physiotherapy curricula in Ireland.

OBJECTIVE

Research however, examining reflective practice as a means of learning and as a tool to enhance professional practice is limited. With mandatory documentation of a chartered physiotherapist’s CPD activities being an imminent proposal in this country, the evaluation of a novel strategy endeavouring to enable physiotherapy students to reflect effectively is of interest to the profession. Therefore research is required to determine students’ perceptions of this novel reflective practice module in their training.

METHODOLOGY

20 Year 3 and Year 4 Physiotherapy students at U.L. were randomly selected. Year 1 and 2 students were excluded as the module occurs during Year 3. Students volunteered, gave informed consent and the UL Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval.

A qualitative research design of focus groups was employed. Three focus groups were held in total with the Year 3 students before and again after their reflective practice module, to examine any change in their perceptions of reflection. A third was held with the Year 4 students, to determine their perceptions a year after completing the module and with subsequent clinical placements. The researcher led the sessions which all followed a similar questioning structure, outlined by Krueger. An independent observer noted group dynamics during each session.

Sessions were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and subject to thematic analysis. This involved examining transcripts to identify concepts (such as significant sentences), which were arranged into four major themes by comparing concepts across each group. The observer’s notes were used to support the analysis and participants read a descriptive statement of their session(s) to confirm accurate interpretation.

RESULTS

Students demonstrated a more advanced level of reflective ability post-module completion, in considering its impact on their future actions. They reported personal and professional benefits to practising reflection, which they felt resulted in a more evidence-based approach to practice. They recognised these skills as strategies to continue in facilitating their CPD. A barrier to reflecting which the students experienced was the negative attitude towards the concept amongst some qualified physiotherapists.
CONCLUSIONS

These students fully support the inclusion of the module in their training and acknowledge its role in improving their confidence, clinical reasoning and facilitating their CPD once qualified. Negativity regarding reflective practice amongst clinicians may discourage reflection in practice.

Further studies are required to generalise these findings to a wider population and explore why negative attitudes towards reflection prevails in the clinical setting.

REFERENCES


PRESENTED

As a Poster Presentation at the ISCP (Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists) Annual Conference on November 10th and 11th, 2006 at the Croke Park Conference Centre in Dublin.