

Student paramedic stigma towards people who use drugs: first-year results of a three-year longitudinal study

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Introduction: Stigma perpetuated by paramedics remains a commonly reported reason to delay seeking emergency healthcare for people who use alcohol and other drugs (PWUD). It is unclear how the period of undergraduate paramedic education serves to confirm or reduce stigma and influence attitudes towards PWUD for students. This study aimed to examine undergraduate paramedic students towards PWUD, how previous life experiences influence these attitudes, how these attitudes change throughout undergraduate education, how workplace culture influences attitudes, and how stigma is related to empathy.

Methods: This poster presents the first-year results of a three-year prospective, longitudinal cohort study utilising the Medical Condition Regard Scale (MCRS) (Scores 11-66) and Jefferson Scale of Empathy (JSE) (Health Professions Students version, scores 20-140). Higher MCRS scores indicate lower stigma, higher JSE scores reflect higher empathy. Participants were surveyed once in the initial phase of their education, and are surveyed at the end of each academic year.

Results: 130 students across 10 Australian institutions completed the initial survey, with 80 completing the initial follow-up survey for a 61.5% rate of retention. There were no changes following the first year of study with regards to JSE (baseline mean 104.8 [SD8.6] vs. 107.6 [SD8.5] at one year, $p>0.05$) or MCRS (baseline mean 47.1 [SD6.6] vs. 47.3 [SD7.9], $p>0.05$). Gender, previous education, experience with PWUD, professional placements, and number of cases involving PWUD on placement were not associated with any changes in MCRS or JSE.

Discussion and Conclusion: The initial and subsequent MCRS were higher than historical controls, suggesting current students have less stigma for PWUD, while initial JSE scores were comparable to historical controls, suggesting similar levels of empathy. However, the first year of undergraduate education was not associated with change in stigma or empathy.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: *This research is supported by a Higher Degree by Research Grant from the Australasian College of Paramedicine, awarded to Richard Armour.*