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International Association of Medical Science Educators

25th Annual Meeting “Global perspectives on health sciences education” 12-17 June 2021

Oral presentation

MEDICAL STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF THE IMPOSTOR PHENOMENON

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PURPOSE

The term ‘impostor phenomenon’, used to “designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies”, was first coined by Clance and Imes in 1978. Those who experience this have profound thoughts of fraudulence regarding their professional or intellectual activities. This perception of illegitimacy causes sufferers to credit their success to error, blocking high achievers from acknowledging their successes and hindering development in self-esteem.

METHODS

This research aimed to uncover and explore the relationship between medical students and the impostor phenomenon. An ethics-approved action research project was completed at The University of Sheffield, using a pragmatic approach which integrated quantitative and qualitative data from a questionnaire, focus groups and interviews. The main quantitative measure was the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), which produces scores between 20-100.

RESULTS

There were 191 questionnaire responses, and 19 students joined a focus group or interview. With a mean CIPS score of 65.81 ± 13.72 , the average student had “frequent” impostor experiences. “Clinically significant” CIPS scores were recorded in 65.4% of students, and on average females scored 9.15 points more than males ($p < 0.0001$). The highest scoring CIPS item, with 48.7% of students responding “very true”, was “I often compare my ability to those around me and think they may be more intelligent than I am”, and “sometimes I’m afraid others will discover how much knowledge or ability I really lack” was the strongest predictor of total CIPS score ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.0001$). ‘Fear of failure’, ‘self-criticism’, ‘perfectionism’ and other associated experiences were also concomitant with total score ($r = 0.49$, $p < 0.0001$). Students’ quotes underscore this data and offer an authentic insight into their experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

The output from this original research includes four recommendations for practice which medical schools should consider implementing in order to alleviate students’ experiences of the impostor phenomenon. They aim to provide opportunities for pedagogical advancement and improvement within the medical educational environment.