



PTAS Project Report (for SMALL PROJECT GRANTS)

Project Title: “Exploring the understanding and development of human empathy in undergraduate veterinary students and nursing students and postgraduate healthcare practitioners to enhance approaches to learning and teaching of empathy”

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School / Department : The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies

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Grant recipients are expected to submit a brief report at the conclusion of their project which outlines briefly the following : nature of work completed; outcomes; benefits to student learning/student experience; dissemination activity (where relevant – actual and planned) and how the activity could inform future work or be transferred to other subject areas in the University. The brief report will be published on the IAD web pages.

Brief Report (maximum 500 words)

What did you do?

As part of an exploratory interdisciplinary project veterinary and healthcare students' understanding of empathy to their human patients or clients were investigated. The research questions focussed the students' own understanding of empathy within their profession including the challenges and factors that facilitate empathy in practice and also to how they felt this was addressed within their programmes. In-depth interviews were held with five student volunteers; two final year students from the veterinary programme, one from a postgraduate nursing programme and two from an online Dementia M.Sc. programme. In these semi-structured interviews the students were asked to define empathy and to give examples in day to day life and practice as well as discuss how the subject of empathy is handled in the teaching they receive.

What did you find out?

There was a recognition by all students that empathy is important for their professional roles but the interviews drew out certain conflicts around how this might be expressed in practice. Workplace pressures including time and working culture were the main challenges raised by all five students that might hinder their ability as practitioners to empathise with their human patients or clients. Additionally the fear or risk of burnout due to caring too much was highlighted which might lead to practitioners' adopting self-protective measures and switching off their emotions to the experiences of others. The students also highlighted a tension between concern for the patient's welfare and empathy towards the client or family and their needs and wishes in any given situation, such as in Dementia care with the family carer or in the veterinary animal-owner relationship. The students felt that empathy was not always talked about explicitly within their programmes and that there was room for more discussion of the topic to help increase their understanding of the importance of empathy to the client/patient relationship and to have further opportunities to develop their skills in this area while on course. They also felt it would be good to discuss self-care including suggesting after-graduation peer support groups where practitioners could share experiences and unburden themselves when out in practice.



How did you disseminate your findings?

The results of this study have so far been presented at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Mind Matters Symposium, the University of Edinburgh's Empathy network, Edinburgh Medical School's Clinical Research Meeting, and will in the future be presented at the 2017 PTAS Forum and the Veterinary Education (VetEd) Symposium, and a Teaching Matters blog post is in progress. Additionally the team are hoping to work toward a perspectives/case study type paper for publication as well.

What have been the benefits to student learning and how could these benefits be extended to other parts of the university?

Although these findings have not yet been turned into tangible learning benefits for students they have provided benefits for staff learning on the subject and the hope is to translate this in future to benefit students. We have already had interest from parties in counselling, social policy and medicine in pursuing some further joint work for which we would seek additional funding for a larger study. Initial thoughts on this might be to evaluate where in the curricula empathy is already addressed in these different disciplines, to think about how teaching on empathy in these and other places could be enhanced and create common cross-disciplinary resources that can be used in teaching and thinking about empathy.

Who can be contacted for further details? Kirsty Hughes (kirsty.hughes@ed.ac.uk)

Financial statement:

This project has utilised the funding awarded to it by the PTAS adjudication committee and the Principal Investigator or School Administrator appropriate can provide financial statements showing the funding usage as and when required by the UoE Development Trusts who may require it for auditing purposes.

Please send an electronic PDF copy of this report to:

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