Foreign language virtual patient repositories are a well accepted teaching tool for undergraduate medical education

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Introduction: Virtual patients (VPs) are a well established educational method of computer assisted learning. With VPs students can learn about clinical decision making and determine the diagnostics and treatment of their virtual patients. However, the possibility to develop their own virtual patient repositories (in their language of instruction), seems to be reserved for wealthy medical school with a large enough student base. The development of virtual patients is a time intensive and costly subject. Therefore the question arises whether it is a feasible possibility to use foreign language VP repositories for the undergraduate curriculum?

Methods: Fourth year medical students studied during their Family Medicine Course 4 VP cases using the repository MedU (designed by an US consortium for US students). The attitudes of students towards virtual patients were then gathered using the qualitative method of focus groups. Data was transcribed and coded using the grounded theory-based coding method (open coding).

Results: Students identified that foreign language VPs can present an obstacle to some students with poor English levels but in general present an enrichment in vocabulary and culture awareness. Especially there was enthusiasm regarding learning about different health systems and behaviors.

Discussion: Through our qualitative data there was a consensus among students that foreign VPs allow students clinical learning and learning of diagnostic thinking. Although there might be population and incidence differences these can be corrected with tutor discussions.

Conclusions: Foreign VP repositories are a feasible option for universities which do not wish to develop own repositories. With the right approach they can be an enrichment to the student’s horizons and knowledge.
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