Background

As part of the National Awareness and Early Diagnosis Initiative (NAEDI), Avon Somerset & Wiltshire Cancer services have commissioned a simulated GP surgery consisting of a set of Virtual Patients. The aim was to raise awareness of the early signs and symptoms of cancer, support GPs with their referral decision making as well as introduce recently developed tools to aid the decision making.

Pedagogy

Virtual Patients (VPs) are interactive online simulations of clinical scenarios for the purpose of medical education. They utilise a wide set of patient-related data, presented in multi-media formats, with which the learner interacts and attempts to make a correct diagnosis and proposal for treatment. VPs are recognised as effective tools that offer the learner the opportunity to practice clinical decision making in a situated but risk-free environment. The importance of simulation has been highlighted by the Department of Health.

The Simulation

Working in collaboration with the University of the West of England, Avon Somerset & Wiltshire Cancer Services commissioned six case scenarios, authored by GPs. The cases simulate a GP consultation and are presented as branched systems that offer the learner various pathways and outcomes depending on the decisions that they make. Additional information was provided to introduce key principles of the NAEDI agenda such as TWW referral guidelines, Risk Assessment tools and safety netting advice. The learner can engage in a conversation with each patient, represented as an avatar, as well as access pertinent data such as medical records to inform their decisions.

The Patients

The patient set consists of six cases, some with early signs of cancer and some without so that the consultation was not a foregone outcome.

Results

Perceived outcome | Agreed |
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Increased awareness of importance of the earlier diagnosis of cancer | 76.1% |
Increased awareness of tools to help assess suspected cancer | 79.2% |
Increased confidence in referring patients as TWW | 63.4% |
Increased knowledge of the support available to obtain further information | 77.8% |

Comments from users

“Good availability of background information.”
“Interactive, interesting & novel”
“Simulates a GP consultation quite well”
“Easier to learn on a case based situation”

Conclusion

The study has shown that the simulations were effective in raising awareness of the NAEDI tools. Also, participants feel they benefit from online working and that the virtual patients have provided a useful addition to CPD activity being online, quick and fun to do.

References


The Development Of Virtual Patients to Promote the Earlier Diagnosis of Cancer: A Pilot Study

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