The confidence of ignorance


Sometimes the simplest of research projects can ask fundamental questions, and this is certainly the case in the article by Professor Levy and colleagues in this issue of Practical Diabetes.

In this work, the authors set out a basic philosophy. They note that lifestyle modifications to improve health are very difficult to achieve, and that very minor interventions directed at large groups of individuals are potentially more effective than major and difficult interventions. However, because expected changes are small, research directed at such interventions would require large sample sizes. The aim of the trial, therefore, was to assess recruitment to a simple intervention protocol requiring questionnaire assessment and follow-up assessment. Recruitment through hospital-based retinal screening clinics was found to be highly productive. In itself, this is a useful observation, although the patients attending a retinal screening clinic are a skewed population given that they have been referred in having screen detected retinopathy, and the results may not translate to the general population who do not have complications and consider themselves problem free.

The principle interest of this work, however, is not perhaps the original scientific aim. The detail of the project was directed at an intervention to assess confidence and knowledge in basic footcare. The control group were given a standard information leaflet on the topic. The intervention group received a VibraTip, a device which very simply tests vibration sense. Both groups received baseline and follow-up assessment of knowledge and confidence in self-care.

At baseline, the study group showed a remarkable confidence in both aspects which is a surprising observation given that this was a group with diabetes-related complications. An intriguing observation, however, was that, at follow up, there was a possible loss of confidence in the group given the VibraTip device. Why this might have happened, or indeed if it is a true finding, is not possible to derive from the data presented as it was not a primary outcome in the study protocol.

Numbers were small and, scientifically, no concrete conclusions can be drawn from the questionnaire data. Nevertheless, the philosophical question arising from the finding itself is food for thought. Educational interventions may generate self-doubt. Is this beneficial, and is there a tipping point where such self-doubt becomes a negative effect, causing feelings of futility?

This study does not answer the questions, but certainly asks a few. Over to the Educational Psychologists.

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