Improving Health Literacy Training and Communication Competencies for Health Professionals in Austria and Canada: A Comparative Study

Laryn McLernon BA, M.A.[1]; Verena Knoll BA[2]

[1] University of Vienna; [2] Management Center Innsbruck

Background:

Canada is a leader in health promotion, public health, interprofessional curricula, intercultural competencies and has a longer history of health literacy (HL) developments. Austria is in the early stages of HL capacity building and developing communication training for health professionals treating people in vulnerable situations. The primary aim of our project is to analyze the education of health professionals (medical, nursing and pharmacy students) regarding HL, intercultural and interprofessional communication skills and patient-centered interactions with underserved populations in Austria and Canada. The importance of communication in healthcare has increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic; thus the question of how communication training has changed in the light of the pandemic is also explored.

Methods: The study design included four methods: a literature review, a document analysis, a curricula survey, and expert interviews.

Initial results: Recognizing the importance of HL and improved quality of health communication; the Austrian government along with educational institutions have looked abroad to identify best practises, e.g., from Canada. Moreover, a national train-the-trainer program was developed but is yet to be integrated in all universities. Expert interviews and curricula surveys as well as a document analysis indicate that communication training varies by province in Austria and Canada in terms of both course content and longitudinal integration. COVID-19 has changed clinical communication practises and hindered training for young professionals.

Conclusion: The development of communication curricula and HL competencies is a long and continuous process in both countries.