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15 – Humour in Primary Care

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Chances are you have resorted to humour as an "ice breaker" strategy or to get out of a compromising situation, and you might recall those "blooper" books during residence in which funny anecdotes were recorded, never to be forgotten. Certainly all of us have experienced humour in some degree in our medical practice, or with our co-workers, and possibly hold good memories of those events, however there is no much clarity in terms of the ideal moment, the dosage and frequency to apply this resources in clinical practice.

Humour is basically an integral part of the human being, but goes beyond the ability to tell a joke, it is a complex, challenging phenomenon, which depends on the context in which we are and the way in which we relate with each other. (McCreadie and Wiggins, 2007; McCreadie and Payne 2011)

Nonetheless, the kind of humour this essay refers to is that which does not offend, does not discriminate nor reinforces sexist stereotypes, let alone sarcastic humour, but rather the one that has to do with the creative ways, verbal or non-verbal, in which individuals express laughter provoking situations. For the purpose of this document we will call it "healthy" humour.

Many efforts have been made to associate both directly and indirectly, humour with health benefits. Be it to ease the pain, the cardiovascular effects in arterial pressure, its influence on the immune system, but no study seems to be conclusive, mainly because of how complex it is to measure humour and its effect, which could even be momentary; or because of the different personality variants, and life stories of each individual who could react differently to the same stimuli (McCreadie and Wiggins, 2007); that is, one joke or anecdote is not necessarily received as funny by everyone, right?

In spite of the fact that a concrete effect of this element is not entirely clear, what has been proven is the positive correlation which exists between the sense of humour in interpersonal relations in aspects like empathy, intimacy and trust (Hampes, 2001). Humour is even identified as part of the 24 attributes of positive psychology to reach psychological wellness (Seligman and Steen, 2005). Likewise, it has been shown there is a relationship between emotions and the immune system; as there is also an association between humour, - pain and humour - in cardiovascular effects. (Booth and Pennebaker, 2000)

Since humour is a social phenomenon, it is going to intervene in three aspects of clinical practice: Doctor-patient communication, in the direct attention of the patient, and properly in the health of the care professionals. (Bennet, 2003)

Communication-wise, apart from being a mechanism to release anxiety, sometimes it reveals hidden issues, remembering the saying "between joke and joke truth looms". Humour is also considered a "protective factor" for those physicians in primary care who use it in malpractice claims. (Bennet, 2003)

On the other hand, it has become clear that the application of humour in the direct patient attention serves to socialize, creates positive links, transforming common problems in group pleasure. Humour even improves relationships between the health personnel, while improving the stress related to treating the patient suffering. (Bennet, 2003)

So, if it turns out that healthy humour is a useful tool in clinical practice, and in addition it brings positive results with the health of our staff and our own, then, what can we do to implement it, or to cultivate it? Are there spaces in universities and workplaces to develop the abilities to use humour in a healthy way and maximize its effect? Is it possible to identify easily the situations that warrant a STAT humour dosage? Can even the bitterest episodes be turned into friendly ones with such slight gestures as smiling? But a fake smile is not a smile..., and the work as individuals begins with our behaviour and approaches in daily living; where identifying mentors in humour can be key to duplicate it in the attitudes of others.

Besides, as humour is part of human beings, its use appears inevitably between the health personnel, as in any place where more than 2 people concur, and normally appears in a spontaneous way.

Therefore there is also an imminent risk that humour is used in a vulgar or unrefined form, that is why some type of guide is needed to outline the limits of constructive, non-destructive humour in the workplace.

As good clinical practitioners, we would like to have the perfect recipe, with the perfect dosage in the perfect frequency for our experience as doctors, but not everything is so easy to prescribe, since there are things we will have to learn by doing, experimenting, but on top of all, challenging ourselves to leave our prejudices and fears behind

The main challenge here will not be intellectual, but rather, emotional, since we must come to fully exploit the wonderful inner human being, the sincere, honest, compassionate, authentic self. This means we have to keep our mind open to learn from the people around us, regardless of their training or academic degree, integrating their related qualities and abilities to generate humour.

So in fact, humour is the key to enjoy the most every moment in life, both professional and personal. It requires some common sense as well as a little bit of creativity; and even if its use is considered optional, it really is indispensable when we really want to contribute to the global health of the people that surround us in our professional work environment.

Take Home Message

- Humour is a social phenomenon between two or more people, it is impossible to ignore.
- Take advantage of a humour dosage to improve your empathy, intimacy and trust.
- Identify humour mentors in your staff and follow them.
- Take a chance to explore the humorous side in your clinical practice

Original Abstract

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/673-use-humour-primary-care>

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