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19 – Empathic Understanding as a Therapeutic Approach to the Suffering of Patients

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Communication between physicians and patients is a fundamental aspect of clinical care, especially when suffering is present in the experience. The communication in clinical practice goes beyond examination or drug prescription and includes the patient's perception of the support and well-being communicated in the interaction with the professional. Often the professional communicates bad news, consisting of any information likely to drastically alter a patient's view of his future.

Suffering resides within the narratives of illness, disability, loss, and grief that patients and families tell themselves, each other, and health professionals. Suffering also tends to beg for explanation. This is another intriguing aspect of suffering; it does not just come into our lives, stir us up, challenge and change us, but we also struggle with why it has occurred and how we can endure it. It invites us to reflect on the meaning, purpose, and reason of illness suffering. It also calls us to consider whether we are going to accept (find meaning and purpose) or resist (desire something different) to our suffering experiences. (1)

Empathy and Suffering

The therapeutic communication with the patient based on empathy describes a special kind of relationship focusing in the lived experience of the patient.

Among the many definitions of empathy, there is one I consider very useful for the purposes of this text. "Empathy is a predominantly cognitive (rather than emotional) attribute that involves an understanding (rather than feeling) of experiences, concerns and perspectives of the patient, combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding" (2) This definition highlights two important elements to the author: to underscore the importance of the construct of empathy in the context of patient care and the intention to help and alleviate pain and suffering as another feature of empathy in health and human services culture.

The quality of professional health care partly depends on the empathic competence of the professional caretaker and, in particular, the professional care giver (3)

Empathy is an important component of physician competence that needs to be enhanced. The authors also indicate that empathy can be enhanced and sustained in medical school by targeted educational activities. (4)

Several approaches have been described to enhance empathy in medical education. A literature review included interventions used one or more of the following—patient narrative and creative arts, writing , drama, communication skills training, problem-

ased learning , interprofessional skills training, patient interviews, experiential learning, and empathy-focused training . (5). A Brazilian study proposes using movies as an innovative methodology to promote empathy because it reaches the learners’ affective domain. (6). Another paper describes ten approaches for enhancing empathy in health care environment, emphatic engagement in health care is beneficial not only to patients but also to physicians, other health care providers, administrators, managers, health care institutions, and the public at large. (2).

The common goal of the approaches is to enhance the understanding of the professional about patients concerns and experience, in order to understanding the patient and discovering his/her real experiences and expectations, in the process of treatment and in life.

Empathic understanding and imagination

Understanding the other in his/her experience is a complex cognitive process.

An interesting article addresses a comprehensive concept of empathic understanding that helps to understand the importance of empathy for discovery of the experiential world of the other person. The author presents the definition of empathic understanding as “placing oneself imaginatively in another’s experiential world while feeling into her or his experiences with the aim of comprehending these experiences”. Although empathic understanding will still be insufficient for complete understanding of another person in all respects, it will be necessary and feasible. (3)

In this definition, the authors propose imagination as a cognitive capacity that is part of the mental dimension of empathic understanding, explaining that it starts with focal attention

According to Symbolic interactionism (7), imagination is something we all do; it allows us to get outside our simple egoistic present physical environment. One very important type of imagination is the ability to move outside our own view of the environment and take on the perspective of someone else. This allows us to temporarily jump out of our own perception of reality and define a situation as though we were someone else.

Empathic understanding based on identification with patients present some risks of confusing their experience and the professional experience. To maintain clear boundaries, the professional had to listen and carefully monitor his/her own responses to the experiences of the patient.

Imagination is an active process. As a necessary element for the interpretative process of empathic understanding, imagination is also a social component that can be developed in the daily interaction with others and thus extending the competence of empathic understanding.

Humans do not seem to escape suffering. But deep suffering—not suffering that may come if we are hungry, or suffering from jet-lag, or a rebuke from a loved one—but deep suffering is experienced when our lives and relationships are changed, forever (1)

The continuous progress of medical science does not reduce the importance of the therapeutic contact with the patient. Dialogue, active listening and empathic understanding are still important tools in the process of treatment and care.

If it is true that the alleviation of suffering is the cornerstone of caring, so it is essential creating a culture where empathic understanding becomes the cornerstone of therapeutic conversations in health care environments.

Take Home Messages

- Enhancing empathic engagement in patient care is one of important task of medical education.
- Suffering resides within the narratives of patients that should be actively searched by the professional.
- Empathic understanding based on identification with patients present some risks of confusing their experience and the professional experience.
- The development of imaginative competence is a key factor for empathic understanding
- It is essential creating a culture where empathic understanding becomes the cornerstone of therapeutic conversations in health care environments.

Original Abstract

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/wa07-empathic-listening-therapeutic-approach-suffering-patients-2>

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