

Exploring Empathy Through Patients' Eyes: A Thematic Narrative Analysis of Patient Narratives in the UK

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Abstract : Empathy yields an unparalleled therapeutic value within patient physician interactions. Medical research is inundated with evidence to support that a physician's ability to empathise with patients leads to a greater willingness to report symptoms, an improvement in diagnostic accuracy and safety, and a better adherence and satisfaction with treatment plans. Furthermore, the Institute of Medicine states that empathy leads to a more patient-centred care, which is one of the six main goals of a 21st century health system. However, there is a paradox between the theoretical significance of empathy and its presence, or lack thereof, in clinical practice. Recent studies have reported that empathy declines amongst students and physicians over time. The three most impactful contributors to this decline are: (1) disagreements over the definitions of empathy making it difficult to implement it into practice (2) poor consideration or regulation of empathy leading to burnout and thus, abandonment altogether, and (3) the lack of diversity in the curriculum and the influence of medical culture, which prioritises science over patient experience, limiting some physicians from using 'too much' empathy in the fear of losing clinical objectivity. These issues were investigated by conducting a fully inductive thematic narrative analysis of patient narratives in the UK to evaluate the behaviours and attitudes that patients associate with empathy. The principal enquiries underpinning this study included uncovering the factors that affected experience of empathy within provider-patient interactions and to analyse their effects on patient care. This research contributes uniquely to this discourse by examining the phenomenon of empathy directly from patients' experiences, which were systematically extracted from a repository of online patient narratives of care titled 'CareOpinion UK'. Narrative analysis was specifically chosen as the methodology to examine narratives from a phenomenological lens to focus on the particularity and context of each story. By enquiring beyond the superficial who-whatwhere, the study of narratives prescribed meaning to illness by highlighting the everyday reality of patients who face the exigent life circumstances created by suffering, disability, and the threat of life. The following six themes were found to be the most impactful in influencing the experience of empathy: dismissive behaviours, judgmental attitudes, undermining patients' pain or concerns, holistic care and failures and successes of communication or language. For each theme there were overarching themes relating to either a failure to understand the patient's perspective or a success in taking a person-centred approach. An in-depth analysis revealed that a lack of empathy was greatly associated with an emotive-cognitive imbalance, which disengaged physicians with their patients' emotions. This study hereby concludes that competent providers require a combination of knowledge, skills, and more importantly empathic attitudes to help create a context for effective care. The crucial elements of that context involve (a) identifying empathy clues within interactions to engage with patients' situations, (b) attributing a perspective to the patient through perspective-taking and (c) adapting behaviour and communication according to patient's individual needs. Empathy underpins that context, as does an appreciation of narrative, and the two are interrelated.

Keywords : empathy, narratives, person-centred, perspective, perspective-taking

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