

Promoting Compassionate Communication in a Multidisciplinary Fellowship: Results from a Pilot Evaluation

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Abstract : Arts and humanities are often incorporated into medical education to help deepen understanding of the human condition and the ability to communicate from a place of compassion. However, a gap remains in our knowledge of compassionate communication training for postgraduate medical professionals (as opposed to students and residents); how training opportunities include and impact the artists themselves, and how train-the-trainer models can support learners to become teachers. In this report, the authors present results from a pilot evaluation of the UC San Diego Health: Sanford Compassionate Communication Fellowship, a 60-hour experiential program that uses theater, narrative reflection, poetry, literature, and journalism techniques to train a multidisciplinary cohort of medical professionals and artists in compassionate communication. In the culminating project, fellows design and implement their own projects as teachers of compassionate communication in their respective workplaces. Qualitative methods, including field notes and 30-minute Zoom interviews with each fellow, were used to evaluate the impact of the fellowship. The cohort included both artists (n=2) and physicians representing a range of specialties (n=7), such as occupational medicine, palliative care, and pediatrics. The authors coded the data using thematic analysis for evidence of how the multidisciplinary nature of the fellowship impacted the fellows' experiences. The findings show that the multidisciplinary cohort contributed to a greater appreciation of compassionate communication in general. Fellows expressed that the ability to witness how those in different fields approached compassionate communication enhanced their learning and helped them see how compassion can be expressed in various contexts, which was both "exhilarating" and "humbling." One physician expressed that the fellowship has been "really helpful to broaden my perspective on the value of good communication." Fellows shared how what they learned in the fellowship translated to increased compassionate communication, not only in their professional roles but in their personal lives as well. A second finding was the development of a supportive community. Because each fellow brought their own experiences and expertise, there was a sense of genuine ability to contribute as well as a desire to learn from others. A "brave space" was created by the fellowship facilitators and the inclusion of arts-based activities: a space that invited vulnerability and welcomed fellows to make their own meaning without prescribing any one answer or right way to approach compassionate communication. This brave space contributed to a strong connection among the fellows and reports of increased well-being, as well as multiple collaborations post-fellowship to carry forward compassionate communication training at their places of work. Results show initial evidence of the value of a multidisciplinary fellowship for promoting compassionate communication for both artists and physicians. The next steps include maintaining the supportive fellowship community and collaborations with a post-fellowship affiliate faculty program; scaling up the fellowship with non-physicians (e.g., nurses and physician assistants); and collecting data from family members, colleagues, and patients to understand how the fellowship may be creating a ripple effect outside of the fellowship through fellows' compassionate communication.

Keywords : compassionate communication, communication in healthcare, multidisciplinary learning, arts in medicine

Conference Title : ICCH 2024 : International Conference on Communication in Healthcare

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : November 18-19, 2024