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HUMANIZING DISEASE



How to improve patient-centered care through enhancing clinical empathy skills within an academic curriculum

SUMMARY

As healthcare shifts from a predominately disease-centered model of healthcare to a patient-centered care model, the concept of demonstrating and utilizing clinical empathy within patient care will be a vital characteristic of this transition. Unfortunately, healthcare students have limited learning opportunities to develop clinical empathy skills within their educational training. As a cancer survivor and educator, I was motivated to create the "The Humans Behind Diseases" platform that can be used to provide learning opportunities for students to develop clinical empathy skills.

DEFINITIONS

There are numerous definitions for patient-centered care, but the definitions that identify the importance of clinical empathy within patient-centered care should be highlighted and utilized. The NEJM Catalyst (2017) states "in patient-centered care, an individual's specific health needs and desired health outcomes are the driving force behind all health care decisions and quality measurements. Patients are partners with their health care providers, and providers treat patients not only from a clinical perspective, but also from an emotional, mental, spiritual, social, and financial perspective" (p. 1). This definition highlights the humanizing connection between the practitioner and patient, allowing the assessment of non-clinical variables in the treatment protocol. To accomplish patient-center care, practitioners must demonstrate clinical empathy skills.

So how do we define clinical empathy? Tan et al. (2021) define clinical empathy as "a sense of connection between the healthcare worker and the patient as a result of perspective taking arising from imaginative, affective and cognitive processes, which are expressed through behaviours and good communication skills that convey genuine concern" (p. 1).

This definition, used as a reference source for educating future healthcare practitioners, creates a multifactorial and dimensional concept of clinical empathy. It provides an understanding that clinical empathy, as a skill, is highly complex and shouldn't be a trait we rely on healthcare practitioners to develop solely on their own. We need to make focused and conscious efforts to include learning opportunities in our healthcare curriculums and training to develop clinical empathy skills in our healthcare practitioners.

THE NEED FOR CLINICAL EMPATHY

As healthcare shifts from a predominately disease-centered model of healthcare to a patient-centered care model, the concept of demonstrating and utilizing clinical empathy within patient care will be a vital characteristic of this transition. Studies, systematic reviews, and research have consistently validated that healthcare practitioners who demonstrate clinical empathy have improved patient communication, patient satisfaction, treatment compliance, patient outcomes, and decreased anxiety. Improved patient outcomes will also serve as a method to reduce healthcare costs through the patient-practitioner relationship/connection allowing for clear communication of the patient's desired outcomes and goals.

DEVELOPING CLINICAL EMPATHY IN STUDENTS

Currently, the training of healthcare practitioners focuses on technical, diagnostic, and treatment skill sets. Students have only a few educational opportunities to learn and develop clinical empathy skills. For our healthcare system to shift towards a patient-centered care model, our education and training of healthcare practitioners need to prioritize the development of clinical empathy skills along with clinical skills. Healthcare institutions need to consciously thread clinical empathy learning opportunities into their curriculum and courses but commonly lack the resources to accomplish this. I have created a platform that can be utilized within healthcare practitioner educational curriculums, providing more opportunities to develop clinical empathy skills.

CLINICAL EMPATHY EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

There are diverse ways to thread clinical empathy educational opportunities into the curriculum and coursework, such as:

- Classroom or discussion forum conversations that use the platform
- Course papers that use the platform
- Clinical entrance assessments that assess concepts of clinical empathy
- Within clinical rotations- add reflective pieces on students' demonstration of clinical empathy with patient interactions
- Create clinical assessments that assess students' clinical empathy skills

To access the platform, please utilize this QR Code:



Please visit nwhealth.libguides.com/humanizing_diseases

Contact Jeremy Barthels at **jbarthels@nwhealth.edu** with any questions or if you know an individual who would be interested in making a video to add to this platform.

