What is empathy?

Empathy: ‘An understanding of the experiences, concerns and perspectives of another person combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding.’

-Mohammadreza Hojat, JHHSA Spring 2009

Empathy leads to effective communication between doctors and patients and builds relationships.

- Improves patient satisfaction
- Improves patient compliance
- Leads to better treatment outcomes
- Lowers medical errors
- Lowers costs of medical care
- Brings more professional satisfaction

Multiple methods have been used to teach empathy, some strategies proved effective in increasing empathy.

- Cognitive
- Behavioral and Communication Skills
- Through Humanities: Reading literature, reflective writing, theatre
- Sharing patient experiences

A recent study at the University of Florida used the Jefferson Scale of Empathy to measure the change in empathy scores of students in their first year of medical school with different interventions: Video clips, transcripts of the video articles, and no interventions.

Empathy scores decreased for all groups over the first 2 years is kind of theoretical, it's 'I think that I have empathy particularly in the 3rd year, but I wonder how much of the empathy people report in the first 2 years is kind of theoretical, it's a kind of emotional, it's 'I think that I have empathy for other people' and when I'm all rested and well-fed, and feel good about myself I have empathy for other people, but then in the trenches that doesn't always pan out the way people expect.'

"We had this sick cell patient. I mean you can read about it all you want, but I never know how it was portrayed, how a patient lived."  

2nd Year Medical Student

"I agree that it starts low, what happens is your actual empathy stays the same in 3rd year, but you're like 'Oh man, this is what empathy is?' This is awful, this is so much harder to have than I thought.'

4th Year Medical Student

Empathy declines after just three months of medical school. Our interventions had no significant effect on this decline. There was a trend towards a smaller decrease in empathy in the narrative group.

What hinders the development of empathy in medical school?

- Focus on biomedical care, lack of time to reflect and lack of role models
- Students placed significant emphasis on the learning environment – faculty attitudes can either help or hinder development of empathy in both the pre-clinical and clinical years.

They identified the following barriers: focus on presentations in the classroom and direct patient care.

They identified the following as major promoters of empathy and that it was important to patient care.

Empathy increases their JSPE score, we conducted two focus groups to assess student’s experience with learning empathy. Students agreed with Hojat's definition of empathy, "It’s the ability to understand what the patient has experienced is necessary for empathy. It's not just being emotional. Gradually each group concluded that empathy is responding in the way that will be most helpful to patients: you must help the patient to help you understand him/her. Empathy means different things to different patients – must tailor one's approach.

1. What is empathy?

Students struggled with whether having experienced what the patient had experienced was necessary for empathy. Students struggled with whether having empathy with being emotional. Gradually each group concluded that empathy is responding in the way that will be most helpful to patients: you must help the patient to help you understand him/her. Empathy means different things to different patients – must tailor one's approach.

2. What are the benefits of empathy?

All students agreed that empathy is therapeutic for patients. They could not agree that it is always as important as other clinical skills. Unlike the MSIs the MDs noted benefits to the physician, not just to the patient.

3. What are the disadvantages of empathy?

Students agreed to believe that empathy was a positive value, but volunteered more disadvantages (35 references) than advantages (25). Their comments revealed some of the fears that students have that may be barriers to empathic behavior: fear of appearing incompetent, loss of clinical objectivity, loss of balance, favoring one patient over another, sacrificing skill for empathy.

4. What helps develop empathy in medical school?

There was general consensus that hearing from patients about their experiences is valuable.

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5. What hinders the development of empathy in medical school?

The biomedical focus, lack of time to reflect and the lack of role models were seen as important. Students were negatively affected by faculty who were not empathic towards students, even if those faculty showed empathy towards patients.

What works against empathy

"And I think that unfortunately we get all of the cold, calculated facts in school without any oversight to say 'Whoa, stop, step back for a second and realize we're talking about a disease, like diabetes, that's an epidemic in our country, that every person that has diabetes is suffering.' No one really says that to you. It's just kind of assumed that because you're a human being you're going to remember that."

1st Year Medical Student

"I was going to say that from interacting with my classmates this year that everyone has come into their own and seem to have much more deep and meaningful empathy for other individuals. I do think, I know that articles say there is a decrease in empathy particularly in the 3rd year, but I wonder how much of the empathy people report in the first 2 years is kind of theoretical, it's 'I think that I have empathy for other people' and when I'm all rested and well-fed, and feel good about myself I have empathy for other people, but then in the trenches that doesn't always pan out the way people expect."

3rd Year Medical Student

What Helps Develop Empathy

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Conclusion

After failing to show that an intervention aimed at demonstrating the patient perspective to students increased their JSPE score, we conducted two focus groups to assess student’s experience with learning empathy. Students agreed with Hojat's definition of empathy and that it was important to patient care.

They identified the following barriers: focus on biomedical care, lack of time to reflect and lack of role models. Students were not sure that empathy could be taught to everyone and may have to be selected for in admission.

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