



Teaching Medical Students Empathy

Qualitative Analysis of 1st and 4th Year Perspectives

Patrick Lynn, MS4, Susan Horky, LCSW, and Melanie Hagen, MD FACP
University of Florida College of Medicine



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Background

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

-Mohammadrza Hojat, JHSA Spring 2009

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

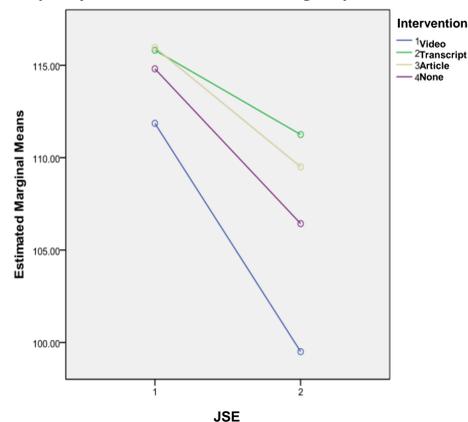
- Improves patient satisfaction
- Improves patient compliance
- Leads to better treatment outcomes
- Lowers medical errors
- Lowers costs of medical care
- Brings more professional satisfaction

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



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.

Objectives

- To gain understanding of student perspectives on empathy in pre-clinical and clinical years
- To explore reasons for decline in empathy
- To investigate student perspectives on empathy interventions



Methods

We convened two focus groups, one of first year and one of fourth year medical students. Students were offered a free lunch and a gift certificate to the book store as incentives for participating. All students who responded to a class wide email and wanted to participate were included. We had 10 First Year Medical Students (6 male, 4 female) and 7 Fourth Year Medical Students (5 male, 2 female.) One of the researchers (SH) served as moderator.

Students were asked the following five questions in sequence:

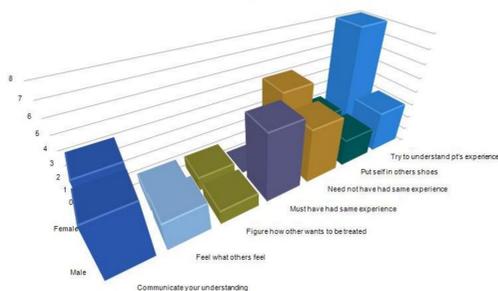
1. What is empathy?
2. What are the benefits of empathy?
3. What are the disadvantages of empathy?
4. What helps develop empathy in medical school?
5. What hinders the development of empathy in medical school?

The data was coded and organized according to the research questions using NVivo 9 Research Software for analysis.

Results

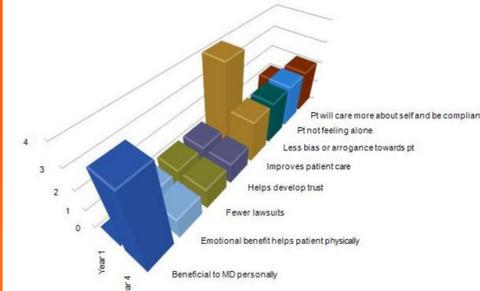
What is Empathy?

Most frequent definitions, by gender

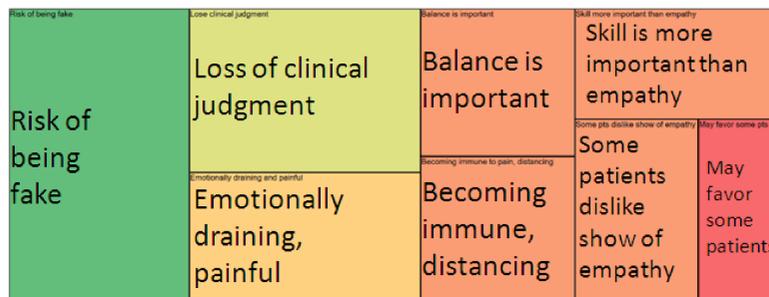


Benefits of Empathy

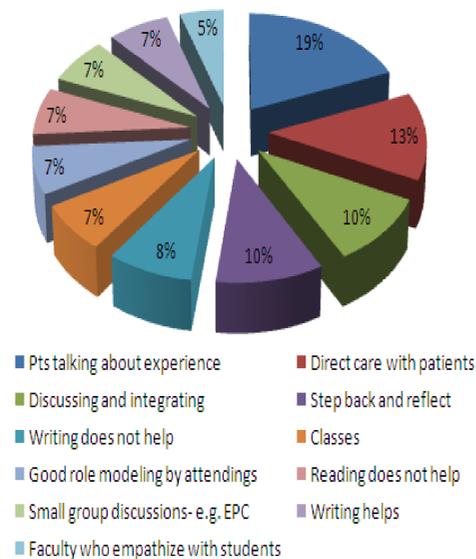
Benefits of empathy by medical school year



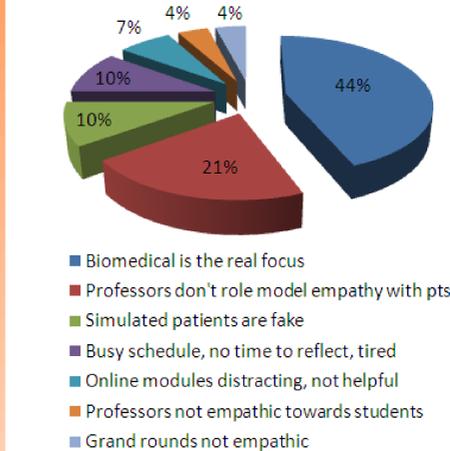
Disadvantages of Empathy



What Helps Develop Empathy



What Works Against Empathy



"I was going to say that from interacting with my classmates this year that everyone has come into their own and seems to have much more deeper and more 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."

- 4th Year Medical Student

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

- 1st 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

Discussion

1. What is empathy?

Students struggled with whether having experienced what the patient had experienced was necessary for empathy. Students sometimes conflated 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 MSIVs the MSIVs noted benefits to the physician, not just to the patient.

3. What are the disadvantages of empathy?

Students appeared 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 insincere, 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. 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. Students held differing opinions on the value of reading about patients and reflective writing. Many felt that learning about particular problems via reading or simulated patients helped them "know what to say" when the real situation arose but this is not necessarily empathy. Some felt empathy develops naturally from clinical work, taking cues from patients. Many felt that self-reflection and integrating experiences help, but that they rarely have time for this. Role modeling was seen as very important.

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.

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 as major promoters of empathy: empathic basic science and clinical faculty behavior towards students and patients, patient presentations in the classroom and direct 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.

"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