Chapter 18
Introducing Medical Humanities--Use of Humour for Teaching Ethics:
A Pilot Study at Hamdard Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Use of Medical humanities to teach empathy started to come into being nearly 50 years ago. It has been introduced in most of the medical schools in the West for many years. In India the concept is still in its infancy with very few medical schools teaching the subject. This study was undertaken as a pilot project at the Hamdard Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, New Delhi to introduce the concept of empathy through medical humanities to undergraduate students. Students were explained the definition, meaning, scope and purpose of medical humanities. The authors aimed at sensitising the students to the importance of the public image of their profession through humour/jokes. The students were encouraged to discuss and reflect on the reasons for a negative image. The session ended by asking for commitment on their part to behave in a more ethical and professional manner once they start practicing medicine. The session was appreciated by most of the students. Majority agreed that medical humanities was an interesting way to develop empathy in doctors and develop ethical values, professionalism and communication skills. It is imperative that communication skills, professionalism and ethics are integrated into medical curriculum at all stages to inculcate empathy in medical students. Medical humanities modules are an interesting way of achieving this aim. Humour has been used as a pedagogic and communication tool in medicine. Its use for reflection and analysis of a situation or as a tool of social commentary to bring about corrective change can be explored. Further research in the subject is required; curriculum needs to be defined, teachers need to be educated and trained.

INTRODUCTION

Empathy is a term difficult to define and it is said that it encompasses ethics, professionalism, communication skills and is much more and beyond these. Empathy describes the ability of a doctor to visualise and understand the patient's suffering, pain and perspective and then to communicate back to him with the aim of healing him (Hojat, 2009; Nunes, 2011). The objective of empathy is a better understanding of and alleviation of human suffering and therefore empathy has a cognitive, psychomotor as well as an affective component. It is essentially a quality which helps doctors gain an insight into the quality of pain being experienced by the patient and doing something active to allay his pain and solve his problem. Due to the abstract nature of its definition, empathy has been difficult to define, quantify and teach. However, the fact remains unambiguous that physician empathy improves patient satisfaction and promotes adherence to treatment regime. Not only this, it is also beneficial to the doctors in that it reduces medico legal risks and instils a sense of professional achievement. (Afghani B, 2011)

In a longitudinal study conducted by Hojat et al. (2009) it was observed that mean empathy scores decline in medical students as they advance through their medical school. The investigators identified a group of students who were 'at risk' and suggested that efforts should be especially focussed on this group as they are more likely to be the ones that develop apathy.

Developing and maintaining an empathetic attitude towards patient is one of the important goals of medical education aiming at producing healers rather than mere physicians. The American Association of Medical Colleges has identified the development and enhancement of empathy in medical students as a key goal (1999). In recognition of its importance, many universities and medical colleges have awakened to the need of teaching empathy to medical students. The situation at present is one where the importance of empathy is gradually percolating into the minds of intelligentsia.

This study was therefore undertaken as a pilot project at our Medical College where we tried to introduce and sensitise first year medical students to the subject of empathy through medical humanities. As humour is an important method of communication and social commentary, we utilised it to introduce the novel concept of Medical Humanities.

Aim of the Study

1. To introduce first year medical students to the subject of empathy through medical humanities
2. To assess their receptivity to the subject
3. To sensitise them towards the role it plays in improving patient care.

Materials and Methods

The study in medical humanities was undertaken as a pilot project at the Hamdard Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Delhi. The medium we chose was humour and the depiction of doctors in common jokes and cartoons.

The following steps were followed:

1. In the first session, students were explained the definition, meaning, scope and purpose of empathy and medical humanities. This was followed by describing the scope of the present session.
2. The second session was aimed at targeting one issue each related to communication skills, professionalism and ethics:
   a. Lack of doctor-patient communication
   b. Poor handwriting of doctors and medical mishaps arising from them
   c. Practising medicine in an ethical way with professional decorum and integrity

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