Chapter 13

How to use illness narratives in medical education

First teaching experiences with the German DIPEX website project

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Background

To be effective, (future) clinicians should gain an understanding of patients’ perspective on his or her illness, including patients’ key concerns, values, experiences, cultures, and preferences (Teutsch, 2003). If healthcare providers were trained to use more patient-centred approaches and to focus on the patient as a person with individual preferences situated within social contexts instead of focusing on diseases and their management alone, positive effects would be observed on a range of measures. These include clarifying patients’ concerns and beliefs, talking about treatment options, and display of empathy (Dwamena et al., 2012). Similar effects could be observed as live presentations of patients during lectures or hospital rounds during provision of clinical care are a sort of ‘tacit curriculum’ to learn more about people’s perceptions of illness (Teutsch, 2003; Bell et al., 2009).

Case presentations are the most frequently used teaching and learning techniques. Ideally, these should balance biomedical and psychosocial approaches to health during medical education. Knowing how patients experience their illness significantly improves medical students’ clinical performance and skills (Snow et al., 2016). For example:

- There are different ways to teach students about patients’ perspectives and how to understand the patient from a holistic viewpoint (Onishi, 2008).
- Working with simulated patients is another strategy to make students aware of a patient’s perspective, especially when simulated patients are trained to give feedback and evaluate student performance (Cleland, Abe, and Rethans, 2009). This approach facilitates perspective-taking and reflection and is of particular importance when learning, for example, about the experiences and needs of patients with disabilities (Long-Bellil et al., 2011).
Illness Narratives in Practice

Potentials and Challenges of Using Narratives in Health-related Contexts

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