

Humanizing Healthcare: The Transformative Impact of Literature on Empathy in Medicine

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Abstract

Growing evidence that empathy decreases over the course of medical training has sparked renewed discussion about patient-centered care. This study seeks to address these issues and analyze how using medical humanities can help to increase the humanitarian aspects of the clinical encounter. The study examines how close reading of literary texts may enhance the emotional and ethical development of medical students as they prepare for clinical encounters. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the findings of this study were based upon readings of several key texts that are part of the medical-humanities canon and through consultation with experts in the field of medical education to provide an empirical basis for how literature influences empathic clinical practice. The study found that engagement with literary representations of illness and suffering helped clinicians to better understand patient perspectives; reduce the detachment associated with over-reliance on clinical data; and increase their awareness of themselves as reflective practitioners. The experts consulted throughout the study also stated that exposure to the humanities, particularly literature, promoted more thoughtful and meaningful communication between patients and clinicians, while increasing clinician appreciation for patients' subjective experiences. Ultimately, the study's results support the conclusion that literary studies should be considered integral components of the medical school curriculum, and not merely supplemental, to promote and sustain compassionate, patient-centered health care practices.

Keywords: Clinical encounter; Empathy; Literature; Medical Education; Medical Humanities; Medical Sociology