

Narrative Medicine in Undergraduate Medical Education: Development and Evaluation of an Innovative Curriculum for Medical Students

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Background

Narrative medicine trains physicians to be thoughtful, reflective and to have a heightened sensitivity to the details of patients' and colleagues' narratives. Currently, there are limited opportunities in undergraduate medical education to acquire narrative medicine skills. The objective of this project was to create, implement and evaluate an elective introducing preclinical students to the concepts and practices of narrative medicine. Our primary hypothesis was that participating students would perceive narrative medicine to be an effective means of enriching communication, patient-centered care, collaboration, and professional development. The secondary hypothesis was that students would develop skills integral to medical practice, consistent with Alpert Medical School's (AMS) "Nine Abilities" and those mandated by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME).

Methods

Project development involved 4 phases. Phase 1 consisted of a literature review, field expert consultation and a needs assessment. Phase 2 involved syllabus development, arranging guest speakers, and organizing experiential components. Phase 3 involved course implementation and evaluation. Phase 4 involved data compilation and analysis. The course consisted of 8 sessions, each 2 to 3 hours in duration, during the autumn term. A medical student leader trained in narrative medicine and a faculty leader with narrative medicine experience, or invited speakers, led students in reflective discussion and writing on pre-assigned or in-class readings and media including poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and illness/caregiving narratives. Experiential components for practicing mindful listening and observation included rounds at The Miriam Hospital and a visit to the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. Course evaluation included pre- and post-course surveys to capture demographics, and the perceived value of narrative medicine training and course organization.

Results

Seventeen medical students (10 first years and 7 second years) with a mean age of 24 and a half years ($M = 24.53$, $SD = 1.62$) enrolled in the course and completed the pre-course survey. Twelve students identified as female, and 5 as male. Their undergraduate backgrounds were varied and included biology, physics and cognitive science, environmental science, women's studies and history. Three students withdrew after one session, and 14 students remained. Of these 14, 10 earned credit (Pass/Fail) by attending 6 or more sessions and completing all assignments, while 4 audited by attending at least 5 sessions and completing most assignments. Thirteen students completed the post-course survey, and all students rated the course overall as "excellent" ("excellent" = 5 on a 5-point Likert scale). Ratings for content, organization and speakers ranged between "very good" and "excellent". Reflective writing, clinical rounds and the art museum visit were rated highly, while speakers who adopted didactic approaches were less appreciated. Regarding the overall value of narrative medicine in medical education, 9 participants considered narrative medicine to be "essential" and 4 deemed it "very valuable".

Conclusion

The Narrative Medicine Elective was well received and positively rated, warranting course development and future offerings at AMS. Study limitations included the small number and self-selected nature of participants. However, students' perceptions of narrative medicine in medical education are of value. Future directions include survey analysis for trends in professional competency development, and offering complementary programs for clerkship students and inter-professional programs.

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