

Physician Self-Reported Use of Empathy During Clinical Practice

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Abstract

Background: The use of empathy during clinical practice is paramount to delivering quality patient care and is important for understanding patient concerns at both the cognitive and affective levels.

Research Objectives: To determine how and when physicians use empathy when interacting with their patients.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey of 76 physicians working in a large urban hospital was conducted in August of 2017. Physicians were asked a series of questions with Likert scale responses as well as asked to respond to open-ended questions.

Results: All physicians self-report that they always (69%) or usually (29.3%) use empathic statements when engaging with patients. 93.1% of physicians believe that their colleagues always (20.7%) or usually (69%) use empathic statements when communicating with patients. Nearly one-third of physicians (33%) indicated that using the words "I understand" denotes an empathic statement. While 36% of physicians' reported that they would use such statements in most, if not all, encounters.

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should be used in a healthcare setting and whether they would like to receive more training or assistance about how and when to use empathy during clinical practice. Additionally, the survey asked respondents to identify words or statements as well as behaviors that they believe are empathic. These open ended questions included no prompts and allowed respondents to list multiple words, statements, or behaviors. The Universities Institutional Review Board approved this study.

Survey sample

A list of physicians practicing at an academic health center was obtained through a publicly available source. The list included 798 physicians who met the inclusion criteria of being a practicing physician. Non-practicing or retired physicians were excluded from this study. Using a random number generator, 250 physicians were randomly selected to receive the survey.

Survey administration

Surveys were distributed in two waves approximately one month apart. Surveys were sent via mail in July of 2017. Study participants were not offered an incentive for participation. All data for this study was entered and stored in REDCap.

Statistical analysis

	n	%
Say "I understand"	19	-32.8
Acknowledge the difficulty of the situation	17	-29.3
Offer resources	12	-20.7
Ask probing questions	11	-19
Name the emotion	9	-15.5
Validate the patient's feelings	7	-12.1
Say "I'm Sorry"	6	-10.3
Say "I agree"	4	-6.9

^aA total of 58 respondents answered the question and 6 respondents did not answer. Respondents were permitted to identify more than one empathic statement.

Table 3: Words and statements physicians identified as empathic.

	n (%)
Body Language	30 (58.8)
Eye Contact	25 (49.0)
Listening	25 (49.0)
Touch	16 (31.4)
Supportive Words and Tone	14 (27.5)
Spending Time	8 (15.7)
Offer Assistance	7 (13.7)

^aA total of 58 respondents complete the question and 7 respondents did not answer. Respondents were able to identify more than one type of empathic behavior.

Table 4: Physician identified empathic behaviors.

	Yes	No
	n (%)	n (%)
I would like to receive more training or assistance about how and when to use empathy in the healthcare setting.	21 (36)	36 (62) ^a
I have received training about what empathy means and when empathy should be used in the healthcare setting.	35 (60)	23 (39)

^amissing response

Table 5: Empathy training.

a real scenario, this study samples physicians' metacognition about empathy, i.e. how the physician thinks about empathy. It is possible that while some of the physicians in this study did not have the reflective ability to think about how they use empathy, or could not label or generalize a definition of empathy, they may have the skill set to employ empathy during clinical practice. This study illustrates the desire among physicians to gain a better metacognitive understanding of empathy. Greater confidence and ability to express empathy may lead to more empathic behaviour in the clinical setting. Further training, such as vital talk would provide physicians with the skill set necessary to better employ the use of empathy in clinical practice.

References

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