Why compassionate care is better for both patients and health professionals

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CoFounder of Hearts in Healthcare
COMPASSION: The humane quality of understanding suffering and wanting to do something about it
Compassion, caring, and human-centred healthcare

The experience of care triggers a powerful biological response in the patient...

...and emotional memories of care last a lifetime.

Photo credit: Gus Chan
Does NHS staff wellbeing affect patient experience of care?

It may be reasonable to presume that patients receive better care from staff who feel happier in their work. However little is known about the strength or possible impact of associations between staff wellbeing and patient outcomes including their experiences of the care provided. Previous research has tended to focus on single aspects or one staff group [1,2], or have looked at associations at the whole hospital level (for example using the national staff and patient surveys, and hospital level outcomes [3,4]). Researchers in the NNRU have completed a study within the English NHS exploring the links between patients' experiences of healthcare and staff experiences at work such as staff motivation and wellbeing at work [5,6]. Staff and patient views were captured at the team/unit level – where possible matching staff to the individual patients they cared for to test associations between staff and patient experience [7].
“Patients wanted prompt, kind and compassionate care. Their views of the relational care they received informed their judgement of whether the care was generally ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and whether individual staff were ‘good’ or ‘bad’ at their job.”
Cascading reactions in the healing response…

wellness genes up-regulated
new protein synthesis
tissue healing
enhanced immunity
lowered blood pressure
positive emotions

cancer genes activated
stress hormones
tissue breakdown
compromised immunity
raised blood pressure
negative emotions
Diabetic patients of high empathy primary care physicians had 42% fewer hospital admissions for metabolic crisis than patients of low-empathy physicians.
Randomised trial of compassionate care for homeless patients presenting to ER - 30% reduction in repeat visits in next month.
Compassion, caring, and human-centred healthcare

Compassionate, whole-person care in terminal lung cancer – early access to palliative care

- Fewer patients have depression, 16% vs 38%
- Fewer patients chose aggressive end of life care, 33% vs 54%
- Reduced overall cost of care
- But increased median survival, 11.6 months vs 8.9 months!
Supportive pre-op visit by anesthesiologist:
- Halved the dose of post-op opiates

Non-supportive pre-op visit by anesthesiologist:
- Length of stay 2.7 days longer

Harvard study 1964: Randomised trial of supportive / non-supportive manner in pre-op visit by anesthesiologist
Dramatic reduction in healthcare utilisation as a result of finding common ground with patient, through compassionate, patient-centred primary care (Stewart 2000)

% Receiving diagnostic tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common ground</th>
<th>No common ground</th>
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<tr>
<td>4%</td>
<td>25%</td>
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% Receiving specialist referral

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common ground</th>
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<td>6%</td>
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Patients who found common ground with their doctor also had better recovery from their discomfort and concern, and better mental health 2 months later
The percentage of interactions in family and general internal medicine that are patient-centred predicts total cost of healthcare (Bertakis 2011)

Median annual cost of healthcare

- Above median patient-centred care (n=255): $948
- Below median patient-centred care (n=254): $1435
The healing power of touch: evidence from randomised controlled trials

- Reduced pain, reduced cortisol, enhanced immune function in post-op patients
- Reduced rate of complications and hospital length of stay in premature infants
- Reduced pain levels in multiple studies (meta analysis)
- Reduced fatigue and pain in cancer patients
- Increased haemoglobin levels in anaemic students
Compassionate caring is safer, more effective, satisfies patients, saves time, reduces demand, gives meaning to work, and costs less.
And the health professionals who flourish in the broken system are those who learn and practice the daily habits of...

❤️ kindness
❤️ appreciation
❤️ gratitude
❤️ mindfulness
❤️ self-compassion
❤️ choosing to love their work
Our true purpose is healing. Our joy is service. And compassion lies at the heart of everything we do.