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Showing empathy to patients can improve care

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Showing clinical empathy to patients can improve their satisfaction of care, motivate them to stick to their treatment plans and lower malpractice complaints, found a study published in CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal).

"Empathy is the ability to understand another's experience, to communicate and confirm that understanding with the other person and to then act in a helpful manner," writes Dr. Robert Buckman, Princess Margaret Hospital and the Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto. "Despite some overlap with other compassionate responses, particularly sympathy, empathy is distinct."

In clinical practice, physicians do not express empathic responses frequently. In a recent study where oncologists were video-recorded speaking with their patients, oncologists only responded to 22% of moments thought to be an empathic opportunity. Another more recent study involving oncologists and lung cancer patients showed the physicians responding to only 11% of empathic opportunities.

There is new evidence indicating that empathy is an important medical tool and it can be acquired and taught in medical school. "Clinical empathy is an essential medical skill that can be taught and improved, thereby producing changes in physician behaviour and patient outcomes."

"Our profession now needs to incorporate the teaching of clinical

empathy more widely into clinical practice at all levels beginning with the selection of candidates for medical school," write the authors. "The behavioral aspects of empathy — the empathic response — can be assessed and integrated into medical schools' core communication skills training."

The authors conclude that physicians must also model an empathetic approach to patient care in the teaching environment.

Provided by Canadian Medical Association Journal

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