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HEALING DURING PHYSICIAN-PATIENT CONSULTATION

Waris Qidwai, Syed Sohail Ali, Semi Ayub and Salma Ayub

ABSTRACT

Objective: To determine the patient perceptions regarding healing during a physician-patient consultation.

Design: A questionnaire-based survey.

Place and Duration of Study: Family Practice Center of the Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Pakistan, in June 2004.

Patients and Methods: A questionnaire was designed that included the demographic profile of patients comprising age, gender, education and occupation as well as questions in line with the study objective. It was administered to 111 patients, visiting outpatient department of the hospital. Participants were explained the study objective, a written consent was taken and full confidentiality was assured.

Results: The mean age of the study population was 27.86 years. Majority of the subjects were males with 68% having graduate or more education. A physician-patient consultation has healing properties for patients and physicians, according to 99 (89%) and 67 (65%) respondents respectively, with 65 (58%) having had experienced healing during the consultation process. The competence of a physician, individual attention given by a physician and a cool and calm attitude of a physician, were reported to increase healing in a physician-patient consultation according to 34(30%), 32(29%) and 13(11%) respondents respectively. The unhelpful physician behavior, incorrect diagnosis and physician's rude and arrogant attitude were reported to decrease healing according to 42(37%), 15(14%) and 14(13%) respondents respectively.

Conclusion: The study shows that a majority of the patients believe a physician-patient consultation has healing properties on its own, based on healing potential in the consultation process itself. Physicians must try to find ways to improve their ability to act as healers during consultation with patients.

KEY WORDS: *Healing. Consultation. Health. Holistic health. Cure.*

INTRODUCTION

Both "cure" and "heal" are words used interchangeably to mean restoration of health. Healing in a patient takes place through a process that draws upon powers of nature, science, and physician.¹ There is growing evidence to suggest that a physician-patient consultation has healing potential on its own²⁻⁵, with a real therapeutic value for patients. It is well known that patients feel half cured if they are satisfied during consultation with the physician. Even a physician's appropriately applied touch, during a physician-patient consultation, is reported to have healing properties.⁶

A substantial number of patients genuinely believe physicians enjoy healing powers given by God, though there are others who feel that physician's competence results in his/her healing ability.⁷ This debate leads one to look for possible presence of certain factors, which promotes healing in a physician-patient consultation.

In clinical practice, we encounter health issues with no known cause and therapy, leaving the patients essentially on palliative care for a lifetime.⁸ In such cases, utilization of

healing properties of a physician-patient consultation may be very useful option to care for such patients.

Present day allopathic practitioners are reported to lack a holistic perspective, causing patient dissatisfaction and forcing many to seek help from 'alternative' practitioners, who devote time and listen to their concerns.⁹ It is indeed probable that we, as modern day practitioners, have stopped exploiting the healing properties of the physician-patient consultation for the patient's benefit. The overwhelming focus on the biomedical diagnosis and pharmacologic management of diseases¹⁰ has led us to give less importance to psychological, social and spiritual¹¹ aspects of medical care, thereby depriving us of the potential healing inherent in a physician-patient consultation.

Based on the given background, the aim of this study was to find the patient perceptions on healing during physician-patient consultation for patient as well as physician, including factors affecting healing during the consultation process.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

This was a questionnaire based cross-sectional survey, at the Family Practice Center of the Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Pakistan, in June 2004. On an average, 150 family practice patients with primary care level problems are seen daily by 12 family physicians at the center.

A questionnaire was developed by the principal investigator after extensive literature search, including input from

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colleagues and patients. The questionnaire included data on the demographic profile of the patient including age, gender, marital status and education. Questions were directed at exploring patient's perceptions regarding healing that may occur during a physician-patient consultation for patient as well as physician, including factors that may influence such healing during the consultation process.

It was administered in English and Urdu, depending on patient's comfort and ability. The principal and the co-investigators interviewed the patients and filled out the questionnaire. A pilot study was conducted prior to the initiation of administration of final questionnaire.

A consensus was reached between the investigators on how to administer the questionnaire to ensure uniformity in the administration of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in the waiting area outside the physician's office prior to the consultation.

Patients interviewed were those who agreed to participate in the study regardless of which family physician they consulted. The interviews were conducted throughout the month and no specific timings were followed. This descriptive study was planned without the intent to subject the data to statistical tests and, therefore, a sample size based on statistical calculations was not considered.

Ethical requirement including the administration of written informed consent and the provision of confidentiality were ensured.

Patients were interviewed based on their availability and convenience. A systematic random selection of study subjects was not undertaken. SPSS computer software was used for data management.

RESULTS

A total of 111 patients were interviewed. The mean age of the study population was 27.86 years, majority of the subjects being unmarried (63%), males (60%), with 68% having graduate or more education. The majority of the respondents were students (38%), followed by those in private service (26%), government service (16%) and housewives (15%). All the respondents were residence of Karachi.

A physician-patient consultation has healing properties for patient and physician according to 99 (89%) and 67 (65%) respondents respectively, and 65 (58%) patients had experienced healing during the consultation process (Table I). The competence of a physician, physician's individual attention given to patients and a cool/calm attitude of physician were reported to increase healing for the patient, during a physician-patient consultation, according to 34(30%), 32(29) and 13(11%) respondents respectively (Table II).

The unhelpful behavior of physician, incorrect diagnosis and a physician's rude and arrogant attitude were reported to decrease healing for a patient, in a physician-patient consultation, according to 42(37%), 15(14%) and 14 (13%) respondents respectively (Table II).

Table I: Patient's perceptions regarding healing during physician-patient consultation (n=111).

Patient perception	Yes		No		Don't know	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
A physician-patient consultation has healing properties for patient.	99	89	04	04	08	07
A physician-patient consultation has healing properties for patient without the use of medication.	72	65	24	22	15	13
A physician-patient consultation has healing properties for physician.	67	61	26	23	18	16
Have experienced healing during physician-patient consultation.	65	58	34	31	12	11
Healing during a physician-patient consultation improves with increasing the number of consultations.	58	52	37	33	16	15
Healing during a physician-patient consultation improves with increasing duration of consultation.	73	66	18	16	20	18
Healing during a physician-patient consultation improves with increasing competence of a physician.	85	77	10	09	16	14
Healing during a physician-patient consultation improves with better communication skills of a physician.	93	84	08	07	10	09
Healing during a physician-patient consultation is dependent on the physician.	91	82	08	07	12	11
Healing during a physician-patient consultation is dependent on the patient.	88	80	16	14	07	06
Healing during a physician-patient consultation is dependent on the environment.	96	87	09	08	06	05
Healing potential is inherited by a physician independent of his/her training.	56	50	40	36	15	14

Table II: Patient's perception on factors that affect healing for a patient in a physician-patient consultation (n=111).

Patient perception	#	%
Factors that increase healing in a physician-patient consultation:		
Competence of a physician.	34	30
Individual attention given by physician.	32	29
Cool and calm attitude of physician.	13	11
Revisit with a physician.	07	06
Patient privacy.	05	04
Formal physician dress.	05	05
Good reputation of a physician.	04	04
Humble attitude of physician.	04	04
Healing touch of a physician.	03	03
Others	04	04
Factors that decrease healing in a physician-patient consultation:		
Unhelpful Physician behavior.	42	37
Incorrect diagnosis.	15	14
Physician's rude and arrogant attitude.	14	13
Break in confidentiality.	08	07
Improper medications.	04	04
Negligence on the part of physician.	04	04
Long waiting time for physician appointment.	04	04
Noisy consultation room.	04	04
Lack of physician interest in treatment.	03	03
Lack of patient's trust in physician.	03	03
Others.	11	08

DISCUSSION

The issue of healing during a physician-patient consultation has been a hot topic for debate even prior to the hippocratic

period.^{12,13} The documentation of an abstract concept such as healing which can not be seen or visualized renders its validation and quantification very challenging. The argument that healing occurs on account of factors other than the physician-patient consultation has led to questioning of the occurrence of healing by those who deny its existence.

It has also been argued that healing for the patient, during a physician-patient consultation, occurs through a placebo affect. The basic assumption behind the placebo theory is that a patient has a mind and a body and the two can influence each other. It has been argued that the placebo effect on the mind of a patient, occurring during a physician-patient consultation, results in a positive therapeutic affect on the body of the patient with lowering of blood pressure, increase in immunity to fight infections, decrease in pain and even healing of ulcers.¹⁴

A limited number of educated and socio-economically better placed patients were interviewed in a teaching hospital setting. These limitations prevented us from generalization of the findings of our study to the rest of the population. Despite these limitations, we have explored and tried to gain insight into patient perceptions on the important issue of healing in physician-patient consultation. Such documentation and insight has important implications for medical practice.

It is interesting to note an overwhelming majority of the respondents (89%) believe in a physician-patient consultation to have healing properties for patients. A substantial (n=72, 65%) respondents specifically believe physician-patient consultation to have healing properties even without the use of medications. This implies that a majority of patients are aware of the healing potential that exists in a physician-patient consultation and it will be a big misfortune if such potential is not exploited in the interest of the patient care. It is not known how many physicians are aware of this healing potential that can be exploited in their patient's care.

It has been suggested that as healthcare professionals we can have a "healing" presence, taking care of the physical, mental and spiritual needs of our patients when we come across with them, which can help them bring back to health and wholeness.¹⁵

Physicians like their patients are also human beings and require healing.^{16,17} They look after the biological, psychological, social, and spiritual health needs of their patients and during this process can have a negative as well as a positive impact on all aspects of their own health.

A much neglected aspect in medical practice identified by our study is the healing potential for physician in a physician-patient consultation. Majority patients believed the physician-patient consultation have healing potential for physicians. A physician-patient consultation is a 2-way process, with listening and speaking having potential for negative as well as positive impact for both physician and the patient. Again, it would be interesting to study how many of our physicians are aware and have experienced self-healing during consultation with their patients. With the anticipated increase in the complexity of medical practice in future, we must help our physicians to exploit the healing properties in their consultations with patients and help them heal themselves. This potential inherent in the physician-patient consultation has not been explored so far, nor has it been exploited to any extent.

It is note worthy that 65 (58%) respondents have experienced healing during physician-patient consultation, but it is equally important to realize that 34 (31%) respondents have not. This fact underscores the need to look at reasons as to why certain patients experience healing during physician-patient consultation while others don't. It may be suggested that there are particular patient traits that help them extract healing from a consultation with their physician.

It is interesting to note that healing during consultation is reported to improve with increasing the number of consultations, duration of consultation, increased competence and better communication skills of a physician, by 58 (52%), 73 (66%), 85 (77%) and 93 (84%) respondents respectively. Our study shows that patients feel competence and communication skills of a physician are more important than the frequency and duration of consultation in improving the healing process. This finding is consistent with earlier reported emphasis on physicians competence and communication skills.^{2,5,18-20} It has been reported that even an appropriate touch of patient's skin by a physician can have healing properties.²¹

The healing process during a physician-patient consultation is reported to be dependent on physician, patient and the consultation environment, according to 91 (82%), 88 (80%) and 96 (87%) respondents respectively. This shows that respondents attach almost equal importance to physician, patient and the consultation environment in the healing during the consultation process. The importance given to a patient as a person in the process of medical care has already been highlighted in literature.²² Our study established the need not only to study the patient factors that improve healing during physician-patient consultation but also the factors associated with the physician and the consultation environment.

Half of the respondents believe that a physician inherits the healing potential independent of the training, while 40 (36%) do not agree with this proposition.

It is extremely important to note that respondents consider "physician's competence", "cool and calm attitude of physician", "individual attention given by a physician", "follow-up visit" and "patient privacy", as ways to improve healing during the consultation process. There is a need to promote these attributes in our physicians in order to improve healing during consultation and to look for other unidentified factors. Respondents believe that "unhelpful physician behavior," "incorrect diagnosis," "physician's rude and arrogant attitude," "break in patient confidentiality" and "prescribing improper medications" are reasons that decrease healing during the consultation process. There is a need to discourage these attributes in our physicians in order to improve healing during consultation.

It is time that we take advantage of the healing potential inherent in a physician-patient consultation. It is indeed very heartening to know that a substantial number of patients in our study sample, agree with the existence of healing potential in a physician-patient consultation and also have a fair idea as to the factors affecting it. It will be unfortunate on the part of physicians not to use this potential to their advantage in helping their patients.

It has been revealed by patients during informal interviews that they feel better by just meeting and talking to their

desired physician. They further elaborate by stating that it is the humble, polite, kind and caring attitude of certain physicians that they find very helpful in their healing. They also feel that if the physician listens to their complaints attentively than they feel half cured. The number of patients appears to be increasing that feel physicians do not listen to them and are arrogant and rude. This is a disturbing trend that should be scientifically established and then measures to rectify the physician behavior should be initiated.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that patients regard physician-patient consultation to have healing properties for both patients and physicians due to healing potential inherent in the consultation process itself. We, as physicians, must try to find ways to improve our ability to act as healers during our consultation with our patients. Further debate and studies on this important issue are strongly recommended.

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