

Once Upon a Time

Use storytelling to
connect with your patients.

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For centuries, humans have told stories as a way to inform others about their life events. Storytelling originated 30,000 years ago with visual stories, such as the cave drawings discovered in the Chauvet caves in France.

The ancient Egyptians communicated stories through a system of picture writing called hieroglyphs. These pictographs date back about 5,000 years and are recognized as one of the world's earliest examples of putting pen to paper or, more accurately, putting chisel to rock.

Technologies such as the printing press, the camera, the internet, and social media have provided us with multiple methods to share our stories: visual stories in photographs, spoken stories in videos and recordings, and written words through blogs.

Consider some of our greatest sto-

rytellers and what they have offered the world: William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Roald Dahl, Steven Spielberg, and Walt Disney.

Physicians and Storytelling

Unfortunately, some doctors may be reluctant to tell stories, compelled instead to use medical jargon and data to get their point across in a more “pro-

an experience makes us more human; other times, it lightens our burden, as “getting it off our chest” makes a problem or a hardship easier to manage.

One of Anton Chekhov's most memorable stories is “Misery,” which opens with the quote: “To whom shall I tell my grief?”² It is the story of Iona, a sleigh driver, ferrying late-night party revelers on a snowy Siberian

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fessional” way. Yet, today, more physicians and other healthcare professionals recognize the value of stories.

Storytelling is part of the curriculum in some medical schools and training programs. The Narrative Medicine movement at Columbia Medical School is based on the concept that using stories increases empathy, enhances wellness and resilience, and promotes a more humanistic healthcare culture.¹

Sometimes, telling a story or relating

night. Iona's young son had recently died, and Iona desperately wants to share the story of his son with someone. None of the passengers in the sleigh are interested in listening, too caught up in their merriment.

Iona rides all night with his emotional pain. Finally, at the end of his long, lonely shift, he tells his story to his horse in the stable. The horse listens patiently and respectfully.

I believe this story is something

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that, as physicians, we can all relate to. When we are challenged to care for a dying patient, don't we all wish that we might have a horse or, better yet, another human being with whom we can share our pain?

Benefits of Storytelling

Storytelling is an invaluable tool for physicians, offering many benefits in patient care and professional development. Here are several reasons storytelling is important for physicians:

Enhanced Communication with Patients

Sharing stories can help physicians build rapport and trust with patients, making them feel more comfortable and understood. Medicine is a complex vocation, and the concepts are difficult to explain to patients. We can use stories to explain diagnoses, treatments, and procedures in a way our patients can understand.

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Improved Patient Outcomes

Stories can engage patients more deeply than raw data by helping them understand and remember medical advice, which improves compliance and health outcomes.

Patients are more likely to adopt healthy behaviors and adhere to treatment plans when they are motivated by stories illustrating the benefits and consequences of specific actions, such as making lifestyle changes.

Improved Education and Training

Stories from experienced physicians can provide valuable insights, but these important lessons are not found in textbooks. The stories can illustrate the nuances of patient care, ethical dilemmas, and the human side of medicine. Case studies—essentially structured stories—are a cornerstone of medical education. They help students, residents, and

fellows understand how their knowledge can be applied in the real world.

More Reflective Practice

Physicians can use storytelling to reflect on their previous patient experiences, understand their emotional responses, and learn from their successes and failures. Sharing stories with colleagues can foster a sense of community, provide support during

disparities affecting their patients' well-being.

Examples of Storytelling in a Medical Practice

Here are some examples of how to use storytelling:

Relate to the Patient's Experience

Share similar patient stories. If a patient is anxious about a procedure,

Analogies can make complex medical information easier to understand.

challenging times, and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and strategies.

Increased Awareness about Public Health and Advocacy

Physicians can use stories to raise awareness about public health issues, influence health policy, and advocate for their patients and communities.

the doctor can share a story about another patient who had similar concerns, successfully underwent the procedure, and experienced positive outcomes.

Example: "I had a patient in your situation who, like you, was really nervous about his surgery. After the procedure, he was surprised at how smooth the recovery was. He could return to work and sporting activities in just a few days. I believe you will have a similar experience."

Simplify Complex Information

Use analogies and metaphors. Analogies can make complex medical information easier to understand.

Example: "Think of your feet as the wheels of a car. When the wheels are out of alignment, the car pulls to the left or right and the tires wear out faster. However, if you wear orthotics that adjust your arch, you will walk better and have less knee, hip, or back pain. Additionally, your shoes will wear out more evenly."

Create a Narrative Around Treatment Plans

Outline the journey. Frame the treatment plan as a story with a beginning, middle, and end, highlighting milestones.

Example: "Your treatment journey will start with these initial tests. Based on the results, we will move to phase two, which includes medication and

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lifestyle changes like a weight loss program and exercise. We will also look into your diet by asking you to see a nutritionist. By the third phase, we'll assess your progress and make any necessary adjustments. This approach has helped many patients just like you regain their health."

Use Personal Stories to Build Rapport

Share Personal Experiences. Brief, relevant personal stories can humanize the doctor and build a stronger connection with the patient. These stories are especially compelling if physicians insert themselves into the narrative.

Example: "I, like you, had sweaty feet, and occasional athlete's foot. I changed from cotton socks to Merino wool socks. I had marked improvement in my symptoms."

Highlight Success Stories

Inspire with positive outcomes. Share success stories to motivate and inspire patients.

Example: "I once had a patient who struggled with weight loss for years. He used one of the weight loss injections seen on TV and lost 50 pounds over a year. This has significantly improved his health. He now needs less medication for his diabetes and his high blood pressure. It's a journey worth taking."

Use Visual and Interactive Stories

Use images, diagrams, or videos to tell a story about the patient's health condition and treatment.

Example to a patient considering a bunionectomy: "Let's look at the structure of your foot. The metatarsal bone is shifting medially, putting pressure on your shoe. This procedure will straighten the metatarsal, improving your gait and allowing you to wear normal shoes."

Encourage Patients to Share Their Stories

Encourage patients to share their health stories and then listen attentively. Reflecting on their experienc-

es can provide valuable insights and make them feel heard.

Example: "Can you tell me more about your feelings since your symptoms started? Understanding your story will help me better understand the problem and find a treatment to improve your condition."

Address Emotional Aspects

Acknowledge emotions and address the emotional side of the patient's experience through empathetic storytelling.

Use images, diagrams, or videos to tell a story about the patient's health condition and treatment.

Example: "Dealing with a chronic illness can feel like a never-ending battle. One of my patients described it as climbing a mountain. There are tough spots, but reaching each new peak makes the journey worthwhile. It's important to acknowledge these feelings and find ways to cope with them."

Tailor Stories to Individual Patients

Tailor the stories to resonate with the patient's background, interests, and values.

Example: "I know you love gardening. Think of managing your diabetes like taking care of your garden. The garden requires regular attention and care, but the results can be enjoyable and rewarding."

Incorporate Patient Participation

Create a story with the patient about their health journey and future goals.

Example: "Let's envision your future health journey. Imagine six months from now, you've been following the plan we discussed. What does your life look like? How are you feeling with this new you?"

By incorporating these storytelling techniques, doctors can make medical information more accessible, foster more robust connections, and motivate patients to take an active role in their healthcare.⁴ These examples illustrate how storytelling can be a versatile and impactful

tool in various aspects of a physician's practice, enhancing patient care, education, and professional development.

Bottom Line

One of the most prevalent problems in medical practice is explaining the pathology and physiology of their medical condition to our patients in a language they understand. Storytelling is a powerful tool that can enhance the effectiveness of physicians by improving

communication, fostering empathy, aiding in education, advocating for public health, and enhancing cultural competence.

We can become more effective and compassionate caregivers by incorporating storytelling into our practices. **PM**

References

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