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Elective Course: Using Empathy as a Clinical Tool

Physician empathy is one of the essential attributes of a successful patient-physician relationship and has been associated with better medical outcomes, improved adherence to therapy, greater patient satisfaction, fewer malpractice claims, and decreased physician burnout. There is no formal training in most medical school curriculum to provide medical students with the tools that would enhance their empathic ability. Students generally learn empathy by observing master clinicians’ interaction with patients and by emulating those role models. In addition, some of the elective courses that focus on the art of medicine address some of the aspects of patient-physician communication. However, these methods are at best indirect and do not stimulate students to go deeper into their own experience of empathic communication.

The course uses an experiential approach to exploring empathic communication between student partners (student pairs), and students and patients. We use somatic movement techniques and body centered meditation to stimulate focus on the emotional aspects of communication and increased self-awareness. After each interaction with the partner/patients the students will write down their observations, which will then be discussed with the group as a whole. While some general ideas about the attributes of a successful empathic communications are offered, students are also encouraged to develop their own style and determine what “works for them”. The course is offered in the spring quarter of the 4th year. Studies have shown that empathy declines during the 3rd year of medical school. Attending this course in the last quarter of the 4th year is particularly opportune as the students have already had substantial experience in patient encounters, have made their career choices and gone through match, and are generally anxious about their future as physicians. Exploring the ways of empathic communication will enable them to start their clinical career with more confidence in their ability to be “good doctors”.