Stories always pose that question: what kind of truth is being told?
Stories always pose that question: what kind of truth is being told?

Stories never resolve that question; their work is to remind us that we have to live with complicated truths.

The Power of Narrative in Medicine

Incontro tra narrazioni ed evidenze per una sanità da trasformare

Brian Hurwitz, King’s College London
Foundazione ISTUD
Milano Oct 2011
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MeSH Search Term*</th>
<th>National Library of Congress Medline Definition</th>
<th>Number Cochrane Systematic reviews</th>
<th>Number other reviews</th>
<th>Number Controlled Trials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Sensory Arts Therapies</td>
<td>Therapies using arts or directed at the senses.</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>1205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Music therapy</td>
<td>The use of music as an adjunctive therapy.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Art therapy</td>
<td>The use of art as an adjunctive therapy in medical treatment.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Dance therapy</td>
<td>The use of dancing for therapeutic purposes.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Play therapy</td>
<td>A treatment technique utilizing play as a medium for expression and communication between patient and therapist</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Narration</td>
<td>The act, process, or an instance of narrating, a story. In the context of medicine or ethics, narration includes relating the particular and the personal life-story of an individual.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Writing</td>
<td>The act or practice of literary composition, the occupation of writer, or producing or engaging in literary work as a profession.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Autobiography</td>
<td>Works consisting of self-described accounts.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Biography</td>
<td>A written account of a person's life and the branch of literature concerned with the lives of people.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Complementary therapies</td>
<td>Therapeutic practices which are not currently considered an integral part of conventional allopathic medical practice - may lack biomedical explanations but as they become better researched some become widely accepted.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Horticulture</td>
<td>A therapeutic approach in which horticultural artefacts are utilized in improving an individual's social, emotional, educational, psychological, and physical well-being.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RCT involving 299 African Americans (mean age was 54 years), 50% with and 50% without diagnosed hypertension. Randomised to:

- an interactive storytelling intervention developed in their own culture and community on DVDs
- continuing usual care.

Results

RCT involving 299 African Americans (mean age was 54 years), 50% with and 50% without diagnosed hypertension.

Randomised to:

- an interactive storytelling intervention developed in their own culture and community on DVDs
- continuing usual care.

**Results**

Among patients with baseline uncontrolled hypertension, BP reduction favoured the intervention group after 3 months and 6 months follow up for both **systolic** (11.21 mm Hg [95% CI, 2.51 to 19.9 mm Hg]; \( P < 0.012 \)) and **diastolic** (6.43 mm Hg [CI, 1.49 to 11.45 mm Hg]; \( P < 0.012 \)) blood pressures.

Little average BP lowering effect on patients with baseline controlled hypertension.

A narrative arises when someone tells someone else that something happened.

Medical Narratives

Depict aspects of lives in time

Represent what is of concern from the inside, subjective point of view

Represent what is seen and understood from the outside, third party perspective

Express interpretations of what’s thought to be going on.

Stories both *represent* and *pattern* understanding.

As a living thing, narrative has many dimensions and powers. The novelist values its creative force.

The historian relies on its ordering impulses.

The autobiographer redeems its link to identity.

What is clear is that narrative does things for us, perhaps things that cannot be done otherwise.

R Charon *Narrative Medicine* New York: OUP 2006
Narrative structures, such as novels, newspaper articles, and letters to friends which enable us to recount events, to depict characters, to suggest causes for events, to represent the passage of time,

to use metaphor to convey meanings otherwise elusive.

As an instrument for self-knowledge and communion, narrative is irreplaceable.

R Charon *Narrative Medicine* New York: OUP 2006
Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres distributed amongst different substances … carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures… narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting… stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation…’.

...and within clinical cases, case histories, clinical talk and case reports.

Narrative is omnipresent in medicine.

Mrs B was 84 years old, when her General Practitioner, who had known her for a decade and a half, was asked to see her. Mrs B had been widowed for 5 years, following the sudden death of her husband, Jack. Her two sons had been a disappointment to her: both were in and out of prison for repeated minor criminal offences. The practice nurse had asked the doctor to see her, after looking at her blood test results. Below we show Mrs B’s multiple and compounding conditions, and the results of her most recent tests, which sparked the consultation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mrs B’s diagnoses</th>
<th>Mrs B’s lab test results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes</td>
<td>Glycated Hb 9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertension</td>
<td>BP 180/96 mmHg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoarthritis</td>
<td>Cholesterol 8.0 mmol/L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macular degeneration</td>
<td>BMI 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The doctor rehearsed with Mrs B the abundant evidence supporting interventions to improve all her biochemical parameters. There was evidence, the doctor said confidently, to support changes in her lifestyle.
Mrs B listened carefully to the doctor, and then remained quiet for a moment.

After a while, she spoke. “Well”, she said, ‘Jack’s dead, and the boys have gone”.


Le Lievre. *A narrative of the extraordinary effects of a medicine ... by the name of Le Lievre's Beaume de vie*. London 1767.

W J Colston. ‘Extraordinary narrative’.
*Lancet* 1832.

JW Ogle. ‘On a proposed remedy for epilepsy and other spasmodic affections: narrative of two visits to the hospital for epileptics at Tain, in France’.
*Lancet* 1862.
A NARRATIVE
OF THE
TREATMENT EXPERIENCED
BY A
GENTLEMAN,
(John Percival)
DURING A STATE OF
MENTAL DERANGEMENT;
DESIGNED
TO EXPLAIN THE CAUSES AND THE NATURE
OF
INSANITY,
AND TO EXPOSE THE INJUDICIOUS CONDUCT PURSUED TOWARDS MANY
UNFORTUNATE SUFFERERS UNDER THAT CALAMITY.

"Infelix qui habitat inter homines
Quosque ipso scientiae vidi
Ex quibus parum munere fel.
"

LONDON:
EFFINGHAM WILSON,
ROYAL EXCHANGE.
1838.
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TREATMENT EXPERIENCED
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BY JOHN PERCEVAL, ESQ.

London:
EFFINGHAM WILSON,
ROYAL EXCHANGE.
1840.
Our first moments with a patient are packed with visual, auditory, tactile and sometimes olfactory information... Of all the diagnoses that ever will be made, most are made during the history... Even when patients are referred to specialist centres... attention is appropriately refocused on the key clinical enactment: the patent’s ‘story’ and the physical examination.

‘We have a patient who came for a prostatectomy, ...as he was getting prepped, the nurses noticed that he wouldn’t talk about his family. Really odd. Then, after surgery, he tells us that his wife and children – even his secretary – all think he’s away on a business trip, and he doesn’t want us to contact them. Now the patient – and they name him - is bleeding, and we just took him back to the operating theatre’.

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A man learns he needs surgery.

He tells his family he is away on a business trip.

After the surgery he tells the healthcare professionals about the deception.

He suffers a bleeding complication of surgery and is taken back to theatre.
Telling2+1

A man learns he needs surgery A patient underwent a prostatectomy

He tells his family he is away on a business trip At some point before the operation the nurses noticed that he would not discuss his family—‘really odd’

After the surgery he tells the health care professionals about the deception After the operation, he discloses that he’s kept the need for surgery a secret

He suffers a bleeding complication of surgery and is taken back to theatre. As he is being taken back to theatre (bleeding) he requests/demands his carers make no contact with his family or business associates.
'Stories are like shifting, sometimes messy rooms we must plunge into, head first… Gaining the necessary skills to read the contradictions and pauses, nonlinear plots, false stories, untold stories, surreal tangents, and implausible characters … lends physicians the skill to enter more fully into the empathic relationship.'

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