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what kind of truth is being told?

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

Arthur Frank *Letting Stories Breathe*. Chicago 2010, 5.

The Power of Narrative in Medicine

*Incontro tra narrazioni ed evidenze
per una sanità da
trasformare*

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Foundatione ISTUD

Milano Oct 2011

MeSH Search Term*	National Library of Congress Medline Definition	Number Cochrane Systematic reviews	Number other reviews	Number Controlled Trials
1 Sensory Arts Therapies	Therapies using arts or directed at the senses.	27	49	1205
-Music therapy	The use of music as an adjunctive therapy.	16	28	347
-Art therapy	The use of art as an adjunctive therapy in medical treatment.	1	4	28
-Dance therapy	The use of dancing for therapeutic purposes.	1	1	20
-Play therapy	A treatment technique utilizing play as a medium for expression and communication between patient and therapist	0	4	27
2 Narration	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.	0	5	64
3 Writing	The act or practice of literary composition, the occupation of writer, or producing or engaging in literary work as a profession.	2	5	533
4 Autobiography	Works consisting of self-described accounts.	0	0	10
5 Biography	A written account of a person's life and the branch of literature concerned with the lives of people.	0	0	22
6 Complementary therapies	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.			
-Horticulture	A therapeutic approach in which horticultural artefacts are utilized in improving an individual's social, emotional, educational, psychological, and physical well-being.	0	0	2

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

versus

- continuing usual care.

Results

Houston TK, Allison JJ, Sussman M et al. Culturally appropriate storytelling to improve blood pressure. A randomized trial. *Ann Intern Med.* 2011;154:77-84.

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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.

Houston TK, Allison JJ, Sussman M et al. Culturally appropriate storytelling to improve blood pressure. A randomized trial. *Ann Intern Med.* 2011;154:77-84.



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

Barbara H Smith. Narrative versions, narrative theories. In (ed):
Mitchell WJT. *On Narrative*. Chicago: 1981, 209-32

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.

Brian Hurwitz and Annie Cushing. Narrative Medicine. *BMJ* 2011 (*In Press*)

Stories both *represent* and *pattern* understanding.

Brian Hurwitz and Annie Cushing. Narrative Medicine. *BMJ* 2011 (*In Press*)

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....'.

Roland Barthes *Image-Music-Text*. New York:1977, 79-124.

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

Narrative is omnipresent in medicine.

Brian Hurwitz and Annie Cushing. Narrative Medicine. *BMJ* 2011 (*In Press*)

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.

Mrs B's diagnoses

Diabetes

Hypertension

Osteoarthritis

Macular degeneration

Depression

Mrs B's lab test results

Glycated Hb 9.7%

BP 180/96 mmHg

Cholesterol 8.0mmol/L

BMI 29

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’.

Sweeney K, Heath I. A taxonomy of general practice. *British Journal of General Practice* 2006;56;386-8.



James Cowper. *A narrative of the effects of a medicine discoverer by Mr Keyser that cures venereal disease*
London, 1763.

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

Gideon Harvey. *The City Remembrancer; being historical Narratives of the Great Plague at London, 1665; Great Fire, 1666; and Great Storm, 1703.*
London 1769.

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.

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(1)

A NARRATIVE
OF THE
TREATMENT EXPERIENCED

BY A

GENTLEMAN,

(JOHN PERCEVAL)

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.

*"Infandum Regina jubes re-vo-care dolores
Quosq; ipso miserrima vidi
Et quosce post traxit fides."*

London:
EFFINGHAM WILSON,
ROYAL EXCHANGE.

1838.

(2)

A NARRATIVE
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BY JOHN PERCEVAL, ESQ.

Infandum regina jubes renovare dolorem
queque ipse miserrima vidi
Et quorum pars magna fui.

ÆNEID, lib. ii. 3.

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 patient's 'story' and the physical examination.

David Sackett & Drummond Rennie. The science of the art of the clinical examination. *JAMA* 1992;267:2650-2.



‘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’.

Chambers T, Montgomery K. Plot: framing contingency and choice in bioethics. In: Charon R and Montello M. (eds) *Stories matter*. New York Routledge 2002

Telling1

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Telling2

A man learns he needs surgery

He tells his family he is away on a business trip

After the surgery he tells the health care 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.’

DasGupta S. Being John Doe Malkovich: Truth, Imagination and Story in Medicine. *Literature and Medicine* 2006: 25;439-62

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