

The Power of Story Telling in Healthcare

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Everyone has a story to tell and even enjoys listening to one, especially if it is engaging and worth listening to. Many of us have childhood memories of convincing our elders to tell stories, some of which have had a lasting impact. This also includes stories from reading good books or watching movies, recalling how overwhelmingly fascinating they were, a drift away from reality. Little did we know that over the years, we would be applying the art of story-telling to our professional lives as well, as health stories influence listeners and readers in ways that statistics never will. Looking back on all the years of my professional education, while learning facts and figures, I had long forgotten the impact of story-telling until I attended a certification course on “Effective Writing for Health Care” at Harvard Medical School last year. It rekindled my love not only for reading but also for narrating and designing stories in my professional field by applying digital storytelling techniques. It left a lasting impression on my mind and incited me not only to write health stories, but also to create them digitally to educate the public regarding health care.

Writing has always been a challenge for health professionals. We seek perfection, whereas writing is all about making mistakes. This might be the reason why we fear writing about our personal experiences as doctors. We fear sounding foolish. Clinicians are good with writing prescriptions or a scientific research paper, and that reflects their authority and seniority. They are trained to meet deadlines and never leave work pending, unlike in writing, which requires a lot of drafting and revising. If we look around, there are abundant stories we can write about, not necessarily for health journals alone, but also for other social media platforms that have a wider audience compared to those who read scientific journals. To evoke empathy, it is more important to write about the condition of the patients rather than their illnesses and at the same time also describe our feelings for them as clinicians. Clinical case scenarios in the form of Problem Based Learning during the academic years of medical training are also a component of story-telling to incite empathy for patients among medical students from the pre-clinical years. As health professionals, we can replan our les-

sons in a story telling mode to better engage our students.¹

Today, digital storytelling has emerged as a popular tool in educating the public on health matters as it integrates digital technology with public health. It is predominantly defined as a story in multimedia form, presented as a video or animation for public viewing and used as educational material for healthcare professionals, patients and families.² Patient education is becoming increasingly important with the rise in chronic illnesses, and this technique of educating and engaging patients leaves a lasting impression on their minds. The inspirational aspect of digital storytelling is that it works equally well for all viewers, educated or uneducated, as it engages listeners on a whole new level, arousing their emotions and energy. To motivate people to reach certain goals, we must engage their emotions, and the key to their hearts is a compelling story. By applying digital technology, we can better engage and motivate our trainees and transform them into lifelong learners, as storytelling is a catalyst for inspiring not only empathy but also behavioral change, both in education and health care.

The power of storytelling in healthcare is undeniable. Besides inciting empathy and evoking behavioral change, stories narrated verbally, in writing or through digital media can communicate complex medical information, provide psychological support, and strengthen the provider-patient relationship.³ Real-life examples - such as Dr. Atul Gawande's book “Being mortal: Medicine and what matters in the end”⁴- Dr. Brian Goldman's TED Talk⁵- and the American Heart Association's campaign⁶- highlight the efficacy of storytelling in healthcare. As healthcare continues to evolve, embracing the power of storytelling can lead to improved patient outcomes, enhanced patient experiences, and a more compassionate healthcare system. There is a scientific explanation for why storytelling affects us so powerfully. In an article for the Harvard Business Review, Paul J. Zak, founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, explains the role of the neurochemical oxytocin. It is produced “when we are trusted or shown kindness, and it motivates cooperation with others. It does this by enhancing the sense of

empathy, our ability to experience others' emotions.”⁷

There is a vacuum in the field of medical journalism in Pakistan as there is no formal training on writing health stories or creating them by using digital technology, even though we all realize its profound impact on the human brain and its practical application in the field of medicine. We also lag behind in academic writing, without which we can never be good story writers. It is time we apply the art of story-telling to the health sciences to inspire our trainees, viewers, readers and listeners to motivate our patients to fight their ailments. Assuming we are in possession of a functional human brain, we have at our disposal a device that has been shaped by millions of years of evolution to tell and to understand the world through stories. We can't change the human brain, but we can change our frame of mind to let the legacy continue.

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