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Article:

Bringing ethical dilemmas to life; the use of drama teaching in healthcare education.

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Abstract

Context and objectives

Empathy is an important element that underpins a health professional's ability to handle ethical dilemmas involving patients, with a focus on providing person-centred care. The aim of this project was to evaluate the use of an innovative teaching approach involving drama to help students experience and understand the emotional aspects of ethical dilemmas.

Methods

A pragmatic approach was applied whereby a focus group was undertaken to gain views of pharmacy students, and a brief questionnaire was emailed to medical students who attended the session. The focus group was transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using the Framework Approach. The questionnaire data was analysed descriptively.

Results

Thirty-five pharmacy students and 10 medical students attended a teaching session. Discussion from the focus group (n = 4) centred around four main themes: general views of the session; benefits to students; drawbacks to the session; potential improvements. Students reported many benefits, including evocation of a strong empathetic response, widening perspectives, possibly building confidence, and having the opportunity to observe confrontation. Data from the questionnaire (n=4) showed all students enjoyed the session. Both groups reported that the session should be continued, and widened to include more disciplines. Suggestions for potential improvements included providing a range of scenarios, linking the session to assessment and providing transport to the theatre.

Conclusion

This evaluation has found a novel teaching method, in collaboration with the New Vic Theatre, to be an effective and engaging way to help develop empathy whilst addressing ethical dilemmas in a safe environment.

Key words

Ethical dilemmas, drama, education, empathy

Context and objectives

Empathy is an important element that underpins a health professional's ability to handle ethical dilemmas involving patients, with a focus on providing person-centred care. The General Pharmaceutical Council expects pharmacy students to demonstrate empathy by the completion of their MPharm degree. This is set out in their Standards of Initial Education and Training of Pharmacists (2021), whereby the first learning outcome within their domain of 'Person-centred care and collaboration' is to: *Demonstrate empathy and keep the person at the centre of their approach to care at all times*. Studies in medical students in the USA have found empathy to decrease throughout a course of study (McTighe *et al.* 2016; Hojat *et al.* 2016). The addition of arts and humanities to health-related degrees, however, have been shown to develop empathy, wellbeing and reflection (Sampson *et al.* 2018).

Empathetic understanding is the ability to step into another's shoes whilst retaining one's own identity and personal boundaries. Drama has been described as the perfect medium for teaching empathy as it can increase the student's non-verbal 'reading' of others (Andersen-Warren 1995).

A brief review of the literature identified that the use of medical drama in teaching medical ethics is not a new concept. In fact, Hirt *et al.* (2012) compiled a guide for educators on the various medical dramas (such as *Scrubs*, *ER* and *House*) with suggested applications within teaching such as professionalism, ethical issues, communication skills and inter-personal relationships. It has been argued that medical drama enhances emotional engagement, cognitive development, and moral imagination, allowing for a more ethically sensitive student in training (Arawi 2010). Medical drama narrative allows the use of what Charon (2001) called narrative competence which "human beings use to absorb, interpret, and respond to stories." This competence "enables physicians to practice medicine with empathy, reflection, professionalism and trustworthiness". Watching 'live' drama in a theatre has also been employed in some medical schools. Deloney and Graham (2003) found that watching a theatre performance about end-of-life care followed by a post-play discussion with the cast, prompted a change in attitude in first year medical students. It affected them emotionally, and enabled them to reflect on the situation, helping to promote empathy and compassion. Pharmacy and medical students' empathy scores were recorded through the use of a survey instrument developed to measure empathy in the context of health professions education and patient care. Scores were found to increase after watching and discussing a 10 minute performance about the challenges of aging (van Winkle *et al.* 2012).

Drama has also been used to teach nursing students in a variety of ways, for example, where theatre students acted as patients in cases that unfolded throughout

a semester (Cangelosi 2008). In another study, students watched drama performed by academic staff, and could interact to change the 'script' in a bid to improve outcomes for the patient (Middlewick *et al.* 2012). A review of the literature regarding drama in nursing education found that drama was used to make theoretical knowledge more accessible in practical situations, to learn specific skill sets such as communication, ethical sensitivity and personal reflection, and finally, to enhance personal development and professional attitudes (Arveklev *et al.* 2015).

The focus of this project was on using drama to develop empathy and compassion through observing, discussing and reflecting on the enactment of an ethical dilemma. In collaboration with the New Vic Theatre, Newcastle-under-Lyme, four 1.5 hour teaching sessions were delivered in one day. Sessions were led by the Head of Education at the theatre (JR), and involved four actors playing out a number of scenes relating to an ethical situation. The situation was centred around breaking bad news to a young lady who was receiving a diagnosis of terminal cancer. It was further complicated by a funding issue with expensive treatment that could possibly extend her life by a number of months. The scenario was originally written by a Keele University medical student, James Ryley, as part of a Student Selected Component, *Theatre and Medicine* project during the third year of his undergraduate degree in 2016.

There were four main sections to the workshop.

1. The performance
2. Questioning activity
3. Hot-seating
4. Small group discussion

Firstly, the four actors played out several scenes related to the ethical dilemma: this involved interactions between different characters, such as a junior doctor talking to a patient. In addition to acting out scenes with other characters, each of the actors would share their thoughts, while in character, at various stages of the performance to help the students watching observe different perspectives.

The second aspect of the session was the use of questioning for gaining an insight into other students' understanding of the situation and differing perspectives. Students wrote down their most pressing questions resulting from the performance to pass on to others and were also invited to keep questions from other people that particularly interested them. The questions which students retained, the ones which particularly interested them, were read out to the group. This was done to highlight the diversity of opinion that can exist and help to identify the elements of the dilemma which are critical to others, when making shared decisions.

After this questioning exercise, the third activity involved "hot-seating". Each of the actors sat facing the student audience to receive any questions. This enabled the students to directly question each character, one at a time, to further explore what they might have been thinking during the scenario and why they acted in the way that they did. Finally, the students were split up into small sub-groups of 4 students and one member of staff. Each group was allocated a particular character from the

performance and tasked with discussing and deciding on a feasible and ethical way forward for their character.

In addition to Year 3 pharmacy students, the teaching sessions were open to Year 4 and 5 medical students as an optional activity.

The aim of this project was to evaluate the use of this innovative teaching approach involving drama to help students experience and understand the emotional aspects of ethical dilemmas. Specific objectives were:

- to investigate student views on the drama session as a novel teaching method
- to explore the potential impact of the teaching session on students perspective of empathy in clinical practice
- to identify how the session could be improved

Methods

A constructivist world-view was applied whereby there is no single truth and truth is relative and constructed by the individual or society (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). As such, the lived experiences of the students were sought. A pragmatic approach was applied to the data, so pharmacy student views were sought through a qualitative focus group, and this was triangulated with a quantitative questionnaire to ascertain the views of medical students.

Pharmacy students who had attended the session were invited by email, with a participant information sheet and consent form attached, to attend a focus group. A convenient time was arranged via Doodle Poll, and the focus group was held in a University room. A focus group guide had been developed based on the aim and objectives of the project, and the literature (see Appendix A). The guide was assessed for face validity and no changes were applied (Holden, 2010). Written consent was obtained prior to the focus group starting; it was facilitated by MA, and digitally audio-recorded. At the end of the focus group, consent was further obtained for the use of quotes, and the recording was transcribed verbatim. The discussion was transcribed verbatim and analysed using the Framework Approach (Gale *et al.* 2013). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the School of Pharmacy and Bioengineering Research Ethics Committee.

A brief questionnaire on Google Form was set up, which incorporated 3 multiple choice and 2 free text questions, evaluating students' views on the session, possible benefit to their professional development and how the session might be improved (see Appendix 2). This was emailed to all medical students who attended a theatre session. Due to very small numbers, this was analysed descriptively.

Results

Thirty-five pharmacy students and 10 medical students attended the teaching sessions (approximately 15 students attended per session). Four pharmacy students (1 female, 3 male) agreed to participate in a focus group, which was 45 minutes in duration. Four medical students (40%) responded to the questionnaire.

Focus group

Discussion centred around four main themes: general views of the session; benefits to students; drawbacks to the session; potential improvements.

General views

The general feedback on the session was mostly positive, with the session described as ‘*well organised*’ and ‘*really engaging*’, with M2 (male student 2) reporting that he ‘*really enjoyed it*’. M1 explains that the change in location made the whole session more memorable for him:

“I think being at the New Vic made it more memorable because I feel like people have different minds, if that makes sense being in a different location [...] so, with it being at the New Vic rather than at Keele, it makes it easier to remember it and easier to process it.” (M1)

M1 also held the staff members (facilitator and actors) in high regard:

“I think what I liked most would be the staff members. They were very skilful and I also liked the structure of it, – so, for example even with the way that the characters were positioned and basically the whole thing, I feel like it was very skilfully executed...” (M1)

Benefits to students

The participants reported a number of benefits to attending the session. They found the experience thought-provoking and emotive, for example, M2 explained:

“I thought the case was very in depth as well, there was enough to really provoke thoughts and everyone’s emotions towards that as well.” (M2)

They reported empathising with the patient, with F1 stating that she “*was completely sided with the patient*” while M3 acknowledged the fact that pharmacists have emotions too, when involved in a dilemma:

“I think it’s hard for pharmacists to just be robots and just think of it like that. You’ve got to have an emotional side to it otherwise you’re not really human I suppose.” (M3)

Although participants did not feel that a single teaching session could have a major impact on how they choose to deal with ethical dilemmas in the future, they did

acknowledge that it made M3 *'step back and think about things a bit more'*, and F1, who had a part-time job in community pharmacy whilst studying, explained:

"I agree nothing major, but it does make you think about the person, the patient and their story maybe more instead of, just like you say, just seeing them [patients in a community pharmacy] as a number and being an annoyance, sometimes." (F1)

Views varied on whether it affected their confidence. F1 explained that she was already confident, having a lot of experience dealing with patients in a community pharmacy, whereas, despite M3 also working in a pharmacy, he stated:

"I thought it helped my confidence a little bit speaking up and speaking to different people and to the actors as well" (M3)

Participants also stated that they learned about managing confrontation from observing the performance. For example, M3 reported:

"..it was nice to see the patient having a confrontation with the doctor and what they did to solve that [...] it would be nice to see more things where you've seen a bit of confrontation and if it does happen to you, you sort of know how to deal with it."(M3)

M2 further reflected on the fact that being part of the confrontation can affect how you view it, so liked the fact he was an observer:

"I think as well they did a confrontation so, it was nice to watch it because when you're in a confrontation sometimes you can get a bit, you know, if someone shouts at you or whatever you get your back up and then you're not able to look at it a bit more objectively so, yeah I enjoyed that." (M2)

Participants appeared to find the different method of teaching beneficial. They reported finding it a more effective way to learn compared with lectures, as an opportunity to apply their previous knowledge:

"I liked the difference from a normal actual workshop and I really enjoyed the fact that it put into practice what we learnt in our law and ethics teaching sessions as well so we could actually apply them." (M2)

They also reported that they felt the small group size would be particularly beneficial for quieter students who might not normally speak up.

A further benefit reported was that it appeared to widen their perspectives, both through the development of the case itself, and the opportunity to interact with medical students. M2, for example, explained how watching the dilemma evolve, helped him to see how single decisions can impact in many ways:

“I’ll say that it showed you more of the consequences of ethical decisions so [...] from what I remember something happened and then it went to someone else and it showed how almost like a bit of a butterfly effect [...] I wouldn’t have thought that far into it so, it was nice to see that.” (M2)

Drawbacks to the session

Although feedback was generally positive, a number of drawbacks to the teaching session also emerged. Despite the case including discussion around a pharmacological treatment option, and funding (so areas that a pharmacist might be involved in), the focus of the case was on a doctor breaking bad news to a patient, and also the relationship between a junior and senior doctor. For this reason, F1 stated:

“I did feel like it was a bit more geared towards doctors rather than pharmacists because of the case that they played out so in some sense I don’t feel it was necessarily 100% relevant to us.” (F1)

A further drawback (which was also highlighted as a positive) was the location of the teaching session. Attendance to the session was low with only 35 pharmacy students attending out of a possible 101 (34.7%). Participants explained that, for some students, this would mean having to catch two buses from campus, with no direct bus route to the theatre. They suggested that this may account in part for the low attendance. F1 also proposed that a fear of being required to act within the session would also have been a barrier to students:

“I was like worried that we would be having to act out things and I think that put people off ...” (F1)

Potential improvements

Participants were asked directly how the session might be improved. Various suggestions were made. Participants felt that attendance would be improved if it was linked to assessment in some way. They suggested linking to the current IPE (Interprofessional Education) activity that is conducted online using a platform (Values Exchange®) where an ethical dilemma is addressed on both on an individual and then a group basis:

“...you could just link it [the theatre session] to either Values Exchange® or IPE, but it might be just a nice supplementary thing either at the start or at the end.” (M3)

M3 also suggested linking the topic of the performance case to their current therapeutic area of teaching:

“...so, we’ve just done lots of stuff on the heart so then if like say maybe next week we had an ethics thing like that [the theatre teaching session] and it was on the heart I think it would just bring everything together a bit better as well and that would make you remember it more.” (M3)

Offering a choice of scenarios in different healthcare settings was a further option proposed by M1:

“I would also like variety, it would make life more difficult for the staff members but what I mean is if we could have a case where someone has this particular condition and they’re in a GP or they have a different condition and they’re in a hospital or they have a different condition and they’re in a community pharmacy [...] if somehow it was possible to give us like choices and we could pick which ever one we wanted to attend.” (M1)

Suggestions to address practical issues were also proposed, including moving the timing of the session to earlier or later in the semester, and providing a minibus to transport students who live on campus to the venue.

Questionnaire

All four medical students who completed the evaluation questionnaire stated that they enjoyed the session, that they thought the session was beneficial to their professional development, and that they thought it should be continued for future cohorts of pharmacy and medical students.

From the free text responses, it could be seen that students liked the interprofessional nature of the session. They considered it a novel, engaging method of teaching, for example, one respondent wrote: *‘Use of actors both to illustrate scenarios and to facilitate group discussions was a clever, interesting and engaging way of approaching ethical issues.’* All respondents also wrote about the *‘different perspectives’* that the case highlighted.

When asked how the session could be improved, suggestions made were to increase the duration of the session and to invite a wider variety of students from other healthcare disciplines, for example, physiotherapy and nursing. One respondent suggested have different endings to the dilemma acted out, whilst another suggested running multiple sessions.

Discussion

Summary

The theatre teaching session was found to be a novel, engaging and effective method of teaching ethics that was reported to be both thought-provoking and emotive. Although only a single 1.5 hour session, students reported many benefits, including evocation of a strong empathetic response, widening perspectives, possibly building confidence, and having the opportunity to observe confrontation. Unfortunately the session was quite poorly attended. A number of possible explanations were put forward for this, including a fear of students being expected to act themselves, timing of the session and difficulty for some students to travel to the theatre. All students, both pharmacy and medical, thought the session should be continued in future years, possibly linked to the current online IPE activity. Proposed changes to the session itself included linking to concurrent therapeutic teaching topics, having various endings to the same scenario, or a wider choice of scenarios to choose from.

Strengths and limitations

Although only a small evaluation, the focus group lasted 45 minutes and produced rich data. Students also highlighted both positive and negative aspects of the teaching session, suggesting that social desirability bias was not a problem, despite MA possibly being viewed as an 'insider researcher' (Drake and Heath, 2011) who organised the session. The questionnaire was very brief, with only five questions. Despite this, the same overall positive view of the session was clear, and free-text responses aligned with views raised with pharmacy students, providing some support that the findings are a true representation of those who attended the session.

A limitation of the intervention itself was that it was only a single session, therefore was less likely to make a long-term impact on students' professional development. In addition, many students did not attend the session for a number of possible reasons as described previously.

Key points for discussion

The study found that students found the teaching session to be a novel, effective teaching method with lots of associated benefits. When considering the underpinning pedagogy, Boggs *et al.* 2007 purport that artistic teaching methods such as drama is underpinned by experiential learning. This relates to Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb 1984). There are four stages to the learning cycle, namely: concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. In experiential learning, students make sense of a concrete experience (performance of a scenario) by reflecting on it from different perspectives. These reflections form the

basis for rethinking initial ideas and understanding. Students are, therefore, helped to assimilate and distil concepts from the experience and integrate the new information with previous knowledge and beliefs. Using this enriched knowledge source, students are encouraged to undertake active experimentation (using their knowledge to understand a similar future situation) which can culminate in a new concrete experience and so the cycle continues. Findings from this study showed that students appreciated being given the opportunity to apply their knowledge on law and ethics in a novel setting. This aligns with previous research which has found that drama can help students to integrate theory and practice (Morrison *et al.* 2013, Lepp *et al.* 2011) whilst it has been argued that drama techniques can enable students to describe, rehearse, explore, deconstruct and envisage issues and experiences in healthcare (Cahill 2013).

Clinical empathy has been defined by Jubrai *et al.* (2016) as “*appropriate empathy demonstrated in a clinical setting*”. This is deemed fundamental to providing ‘patient-centred care’. Providing patient- (or person-) centred care involves supporting patients to be actively involved in their own care, helping them to manage their own health and supporting them to make informed decisions (NHS E&I). Empathy is an important element within the patient-healthcare professional relationship, and studies have shown, for example, that empathetic patient-doctor relationships have resulted in better patient satisfaction (Kim *et al.* 2004) and improved health outcomes (Del Canale *et al.* 2012). Findings from this study on evoking an empathetic response to the scenario being presented, aligns with previous literature that argues that drama is an effective method to help develop empathy in future healthcare professionals (Andersen-Warren 1995; Arawi 2010; Charon 2001; Deloney and Graham 2003; van Winkle *et al.* 2012).

Both pharmacy students and medical students highlighted that the performance had the effect of widening their perspectives of the problem. This appeared to be through the format of the session, whereby personal reflections of individual characters were divulged and follow-on actions and consequences became apparent throughout the duration of the dilemma. They acknowledged that this was needed to understand a situation more fully. The participants also reported that they valued the fact that the session was inter-professional, so there was opportunity to hear the perspectives of a different future healthcare professional on how they might address the scenario. Gracia (2003) argues that, when faced with an ethical dilemma, if an individual can obtain a greater understanding of the wide range of views that people might hold, this can modify the individual’s perception of the problem. This seems to have been borne out in the theatre session, and appears to have reinforced this important concept for the interviewees.

Areas for improvements

A number of suggestions were proposed to improve the specific teaching session itself, by making the case more relevant to pharmacy, allowing a greater time for discussion, acting out different endings, or providing a choice of healthcare settings for a range of scenarios (rather than limiting choice). Participants would like to see a continuation of the format of a theatre session to address ethical dilemmas, alongside students from other disciplines. Suggestions to encourage and enable attendance included linking the session to some form of assessment, and providing transport to the theatre.

Potential future teaching sessions

All health and social care students may be faced with difficult dilemmas in their future practice (or before that whilst on placement). It is important for students to be supported during their undergraduate education to develop non-tangible skills such as empathy and compassion, necessary for providing truly person-centred care, and keeping patient-focused when making difficult decisions. If funding is available, the hope is to continue working with the New Vic theatre, with a greater number of students across more disciplines. A pre-visit to Keele University by the Head of Education (JR) could be undertaken to clarify expectations in a bid to encourage greater attendance at future sessions.

Conclusions

This evaluation has found a novel teaching method, in collaboration with the New Vic Theatre, to be an effective and engaging way to help develop empathy whilst addressing ethical dilemmas in a safe environment. Findings of the evaluation support continuation of the teaching session, with a request for greater engagement across a wider range of students. The logistics of this, coupled with financial constraints may be challenging, but future students are likely to benefit from the experience.

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The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Appendix 1: Focus group guide

Bringing ethical dilemmas to life; the use of drama teaching in health education

Focus group guide

- Review aim and objectives of study; reiterate confidential nature, assure anonymity; discuss my role; set ground rules (respect each other's views, everyone given chance to participate fully)
- Elicit any further questions regarding the research.
- **Obtain written consent from each participant.**
- Note gender and discipline of each student.
- Ask for all participants to state their name at beginning of recording.

1. General views on the teaching session

- i.What did you think of the drama teaching session overall?
- ii.What were your expectations of the teaching session before you undertook it?
- iii.How does this compare with your actual experience?

2. Potential impact/influence of teaching session on the individual

- i.Do you think it has affected your level of confidence in regards to dealing with ethical scenarios in the future? Explain.
- ii.Do you think it has in any way affected the levels of empathy and compassion you might feel towards patients in the future? Explain.
- iii.Do you think participating in the teaching session affected how you might communicate with patients in the future? Explain.
- iv.Do you think this experience will impact/influence the way you approach ethical situations generally in the future? Explain.

3. Specific views on running the session

- i.What aspects of the session did you particularly like?
- ii.What aspects of the session would you change?
- iii.In what ways could we improve the session?
- iv.Would you like to do this again next year?
- v.Should we continue this with future cohorts of students?

Thank you for your time.

Sign consent for use of quotes

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Evaluation of Ethics Drama session

Please complete the following brief questionnaire regarding the joint Medicine and Pharmacy ethics drama session that was held at the New Vic Theatre on Mon 9th December 2019.

***Required**

1. Did you enjoy the session? *

Y

e

s

N

o

2. Did you think the session was beneficial to your professional development? *

Y

e

s

N

o

3. List three things that you liked about the session *

4. List three ways in which you think the session could be improved. *

5. Do you think we should continue to run the session for future cohorts of pharmacy and medical students? *

Y

N
