How volunteers help our patients heal
– the amazing science of caring

Dr Robin Youngson
CoFounder of Hearts in Healthcare
‘How volunteers help our patients heal’

Clinicians take care of the injury or the disease… who takes care of the person?
‘How volunteers help our patients heal’
Grateful for her clinical care, which I thought was excellent
‘How volunteers help our patients heal’

Three months like this…

• Can’t see a TV
• Can’t read a book or magazine
• Can’t see out the window
• Can’t see the faces of nurses who touch her
• Can’t feed herself
• Hospital food is not nutritious or tasty
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Her only view of the world for 100 days – the ceiling of her hospital room
When health professionals no longer have time to care, it’s the opportunity for volunteers to become healers
‘How volunteers help our patients heal’

Caring is shown in the smallest acts that take just a moment…
‘How volunteers help our patients heal’

Thirteen years of international campaigning in 15 countries – every country, colour, culture and creed has the same issues
Compassion is the calling that brought us into service – knowing suffering and wanting to do something about it
‘How volunteers help our patients heal’

Professor Tania Singer, Director, Department of Social Neuroscience, Max Planck Institute for Human, Cognitive and Brain Sciences, Leipzig

Why we must transform empathy to compassion...

Empathy alone

- Self-related emotion
- Feeling with the other
- Empathic distress
- Poor health, burnout
- Aversive experience, withdrawal
- Activation of brain circuits related to pain

Add loving kindness & the motivation to address suffering

- Other-related emotion
- Feeling for the other
- Positive feelings: love
- Good health
- Prosocial motivation
- Activation of brain circuits related to affiliation

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Adding compassion to anaesthetic practice
Supportive pre-op visit by anesthesiologist:
- Halved the dose of post-op opiates

Non-supportive pre-op visit by anesthesiologist:
- Length of stay 2.7 days longer

Harvard study 1964: Randomised trial of supportive / non-supportive manner in pre-op visit by anesthesiologist
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Randomized, controlled trial of empathetic pre-op consultation:

- Better wound healing
- Better surgical outcomes
- Less anxiety
- Less pain
- Higher levels of daily activities

Our materialistic science is misleading – each of our patients is an amazingly dynamic mind-body whole being.
One episode of exercise changes gene expression.

3 hours of exercise per week for three months changed expression in 5,000 genes

Lindhold ME. Epigenetics. 2014 Dec;9(12):1557-69
Nine week mind-body program altered expression of 1,059 genes in a trial of patients with inflammatory bowel disease

Our life experiences, beliefs and internal stories dynamically change our gene expression, altering health outcomes.

Emotional trauma affects our gene expression
Psychotherapy permits up-regulation of the gene for brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) causing structural changes to the brain that reverse the effects of emotional trauma.
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The science of interpersonal connection
Electromagnetic coupling of hearts and brains between individuals

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HeartMath® Institute
expanding heart connections
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Mirror neurons

Interpersonal neurodevelopment
Cascading reactions in the healing response…

- wellness genes up-regulated
- new protein synthesis
- tissue healing
- enhanced immunity
- lowered blood pressure
- positive emotions

- cancer genes activated
- stress hormones
- tissue breakdown
- compromised immunity
- raised blood pressure
- negative emotions
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What are the healing opportunities for volunteers?

• Listening, empathy and compassion
• Relieving anxiety
• Helping with nutrition
• Being good company
• Practical support, helping patients navigate the system
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Every journey with a patient is an opportunity to make the healing connection...
Navigating the complex health system is extremely difficult for patients and families – every person deserves an advocate and navigator.
The negative impacts of patient anxiety…

- Increased pain
- Less mobility
- Impaired immune function
- Delayed tissue healing
- Helplessness and passivity

You can help relieve anxiety…
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Compassionate care transforms many other clinical outcomes...
Diabetic patients of high empathy primary care physicians had 42% fewer hospital admissions for metabolic crisis than patients of low-empathy physicians.
Compassionate, whole-person care in terminal lung cancer – early access to palliative care

- Fewer patients have depression, 16% vs 38%
- Fewer patients chose aggressive end of life care, 33% vs 54%
- Reduced overall cost of care
- But increased median survival, 11.6 months vs 8.9 months!
Randomised trial of compassionate care for homeless patients presenting to ER - 30% reduction in repeat visits in next month
Trauma patients who rated their surgeon “high empathy” are twenty times more likely to fall into the better subjective outcomes group at six weeks after discharge:

- Very satisfied with care
- Believe that treatment is effective
- Treatment makes me feel better
- Improved quality of life
The Influence of the Patient-Clinician Relationship on Healthcare Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Randomized Controlled Trials

John M. Kelley¹,³*, Gordon Kraft-Todd¹, Lidia Schapira¹,⁴, Joe Kossowsky²,⁵,⁶, Helen Riess¹

¹Empathy and Relational Science Program, Psychiatry Department, Massachusetts General Hospital/Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America, ²Program in Placebo Studies and the Therapeutic Encounter, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center/Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America, ³Psychology Department, Endicott College, Beverly, Massachusetts, United States of America, ⁴Department of Medicine, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America, ⁵Department of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine, Boston Children’s Hospital/Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, United States of America, ⁶Department of Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland

Abstract

*Objective:* To determine whether the patient-clinician relationship has a beneficial effect on either objective or validated subjective healthcare outcomes.

Physician-patient relationship has bigger effect size on 5-year mortality than smoking cessation or taking aspirin.
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Caring takes no time – it’s an attitude!
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Volunteers as leaders in healthcare...
How volunteers help our patients heal

Five daily practices that can transform your work...

1. Choose your thoughts on your journey to work
2. Small acts of kindness
3. Making the human connection
4. Find out your patient’s concerns
5. Treat every patient like a family member

Photo credit: Lewishamdreamer
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Some relevant references:

Practising compassion in an uncompassionate health system

We are not helpless victims of the system, write Hearts in Healthcare co-founder, Robin Youngson. “We just don’t have time to care!” is the heartfelt protest of health workers in every country.