

TEACHING HOW THE PATIENTS' PARTICIPATION IMPROVES THEIR MEDICAL CARE. EXPERIENCE WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS IN A LATIN COUNTRY

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Traditionally, patients suffer and accept patiently all the health care problems they may have, and the doctor's work is never challenged by the patients. This conception is more extended in poor undeveloped countries. Usually, these countries have a deteriorated and deficient medical care because of economical, educational, political and cultural factors. This makes more difficult to get an adequate medical care. Could a patient do anything to change this? At the present time, it is well known that the active participation of the patient in his or her health care is very important in the outcome. This is totally ignored for patients in undeveloped countries, independently of his or her educational level. An informal short seminar to discuss topics such as the horizontal patient-doctors relationship, patient's rights, informed consent, medical error etc. was appealing for college students. Their opinions after the course showed the change in their attitude respect to the preconceptions they had. They expressed they will have an active participation in the next opportunity they need medical care. They also wanted that these teachings were mandatory especially for medical students. Finally, they voiced the interest in the diffusion of these concepts to the rest of the community because of their immediate beneficial application. This experience suggested that the public is very receptive to these ideas, and that it is possible that individuals become educated patients. These active patients will demand and watch for a better medical care, even in the precarious existing conditions, with the consequent benefit for patients and doctors. Therefore, institutions and governments should also put emphasis in patient's education to improve the health care systems.

Introduction

What is the problem? There are many complaints of the patients about the medical care. These are from a wide range from minor ones like to have to be waiting in line for hours to disastrous irreversible results in the care of the patient. This happens in developed countries with educated patients used to have high quality medical care. The same occurs in the poor developing countries, but this problem is particularly larger in number and with more serious complaining, but however this stays just as rumors. The traditional way to see the doctors-patients relationship especially in Latin countries like Venezuela has very strong roots that make very difficult for the common patients to raise questions or demands about the medical services. It could be easy to think that the reason for that is because the patients are poor, not educated. But, the traditional view of the paternalist physician patient relationship is strongly imprinted in the community. We wanted to know first the opinion of college students of careers different to the health area about the health care and their experience with doctors. Then, we gave them information about the basics of the topics like new conceptions in the patient-doctor relationship, patient's rights, informed consent, errors in medical care etc. Finally we tested the interest and changes in attitude about these topics. The results suggested that is possible to stimulate people about participation in their health care and that is an easy way to get improvement in the individual outcome of the medical care. This can be done apart of the efforts of the different providers of health care (institutions, governments), especially when there are very serious economical problems to offer good quality medical support.

Methods

The subjects were second year college students of both gender, between 19-21 years old of Engineering (n=15) or Medical (n=20) Schools at the Universidad de los Andes in Mérida, Venezuela. The engineering students have to take a mandatory seminar about a topic non related to their career. They freely choose a seminar about health issues. The medical students volunteered to have this seminar once a week during 6 weeks (see seminar program).

Dynamical techniques used in the seminar sessions: readings about the issues, discussions of real life cases about medical care, in many of them the students made dramatization of the cases using their own words, the students judged the attitudes of doctors and patients in each case. At the end of the seminar, they discussed the same cases again and have a new verdict about the doctors and patient behaviors and contrasted their former positions about the cases. At the end, all the students were asked to answer a questioner (see questioner) and write about the changes in their attitude about the doctor-patient relationship topics. They did not know in advance they will have this non-graded questioner at the end. The medical students also had an initial questioner related why they choose the career and how they imagined it was the patient-doctors relationship.

Seminar

“Medical care from the patient prospective, or Patient participation in the achievement of a better medical care”

Program

1. Introduction. What is the problem in the medical care? Patient's role in the medical care.
Real life cases of “good” and “bad” medical care according the students opinions.
Discussion and conclusions
2. What is it expected from the doctor? (“the ideal doctor”)
What is it expected from the patient?
Traditional positions of patients and doctors that induce to malpraxis.
Discussion and conclusions.
3. The doctor as a server, the patient as user and consumer,
The health or medical care as a service.
Public vs. private medical care. Are there differences?
4. Hippocrates Oath. Analysis.
Patient-doctor relationship. Is it a contract? Legal implications.
Doctors' duties, patients' rights.
Patients' informed consent. The right to be informed.
Discussion and conclusions.
5. Are there medical errors? How to handle the medical error? Patient's role in prevention of medical errors. Patient's responsibilities.
Discussion and conclusions.
6. Re-analysis of the discussion cases under the new conceptions discussed in the previous sessions.
Evaluation of the roles of doctors, other allied health professionals and patients and how to prevent the errors in the discussed cases.
7. Final conclusions and comments.

Final Questionary

1. ¿Does your opinion about how the patient-doctor relationship should be is the same now than before the seminar?
2. ¿Has your opinion about the role of the patients in their medical care changed? Why?
3. ¿Do you think that the discussed issues could be useful for you from now on?
4. ¿What was the most interesting new issue for you? ¿Would you recommend repeat this type of seminar to others?

Results

Analysis of the opinions expressed by the students in response to the questioner.

Question 1. ¿Does your opinion about how the patient-doctor relationship should be is the same now than before the seminar?

All the students said they have a different opinion now. They were surprised they can have rights as patients, but they easily understood that if they know their rights they can ask for a better attention, and that a good doctor-patient relationship is associated with a better medical care. Here there some examples about what they said.

“Now, I know clearly, which are the duties and rights of the patients and doctors”

“Now, I know that the medical care also depends on the patient, he or she can make that the doctors give a better service to the patients”

“The information I received in this seminar will serve as orientation for future experiences with doctors. We will be the main characters in our relationship with the doctors.”

“As an informed patient, he or she knows now that if the rights and duties are observed in the practice, the patient-doctor relationship will be better and also the medical care”

“Definitively, this seminar has changed my way to understand the relation between doctors and their patients. I learned that the doctor is not a genius that knows exactly what the patient may have and that he or she is simply a person that can make mistakes as anybody else that offers his or her services to the community.” “Besides, I learned that the physician cannot guess what the patient has if the patient does not tell him sincerely what he or she feels.” “I also understood that in the relation between doctors and patients each one has rights and responsibilities and that the most important part must be the health of the patient”

“During the seminar I could hear not very nice stories about medical care and I reached to the conclusion that not all the doctors treat the same to their patients. Some are kind and other not much, but I think that the patients also may put some part in the relation and treat the doctors not only as physicians but as friends”

“My opinion has changed notably, in this country the relation is very unequal, the doctor is some steps above the patient and this should not be because the doctor is giving a service to the community and the patient is a user of that service”

“I know better my rights and I can ask for more information, so I can follow well the doctor’s instructions. In this way, we mutually get benefits, the doctor triumphs professionally and I can get more from his or her knowledge”

“Now, I know the importance of knowing our rights and our duties as patients”

“We must ask more of the medical care but we also should improve as patients”

Question 2 ¿Has your opinion about the role of the patients in their medical care changed? Why?

The result was the same than for the first question. All said that they changed the view they had about the patient's role. In the beginning they did not have any idea that the patient could have any input in their care, for them the patient's role was a very passive one.

Here some examples of their expressions:

“The patient has to be completely sincere with the doctor, has to follow the prescribed treatment in order to ask for the patient's rights”

“My opinion has changed completely; the patient has the power to influence in his or her own medical service, if he or she communicates openly everything about the disease to the doctor”

“All the preconceptions I had before the seminar about the relationship with doctors were changed for new ideas; I understood that if each party does the best, obviously the relationship will be productive and beneficial for both parties”

“I learned that it is necessary that the patient communicates everything to the doctors in order to the doctors can perform correctly their work, that means reach the adequate diagnostic and treatment and correct on time wrong decisions.”

“I have changed my opinion about the patient's role in the medical care. I am a customer of a service, therefore I deserve an effective, fair and immediate care for my problems and the doctor as a care giver must accomplish his or her role”

“the patient is a person equal to the doctor but that we have different roles and each one must respect the other's role. The relation should be more the relation of friends than anything else, since the doctor in certain way is a confident”

“I consider that the patient must be more active and must always struggle for the respect of his or her rights”

“The patients must be less passive, must not have fear to make questions and interact more with the doctors”

“We must discuss very well the treatment to be sure we understood everything in order to have an efficient compliance”

“as a patient I think we have to ask for our rights but also respect the doctor's ones.”

“We must be more conscious in the patient-doctor relationship, we must be more involved with the doctor, asking all the questions to do not have any doubts respect to our disease, we must have more confidence with our doctors”

Question 3 ;Do you believe that the discussed issues can be useful for you in the future?

Again the response was uniform in all the students. They believe that the discussions about the issues in the program will be useful for them.

Here there are some examples:

“Of course, since the discussed cases were real and common in the daily life”

“I considered before that the patient should be passive because of the exaggerated respect and distance towards the doctor, but now I know that the relation must be of mutual respect and confidence”

“The discussed issues are useful because they are the reality that one lives daily with the family, friends etc.”

“Yes, because we can transmit all that we learned to the persons in our environment”

“Yes, especially all about rights and duties that then patients have”

“next time I need medical care it will be much easier because I will know if what the doctors are doing is right or not and I can ask for my rights” “ it is a shame that only few people have the information we have now”

“The issues were interesting; I think we all learned something that will be applied in the moment to deal with a doctor”

“We must respect the doctor’s work in the same way we must expect from the doctors a fair treatment” “I think it is necessary to imprint these ideas to all the medical students from the beginning of their career”

“We learned things we ignored such as the rights and responsibilities of the patients”

“In the beginning I thought this seminar it was a waste of time but then I realized that the discussions were about real life issues and I could see the patient-doctor relationship from a different prospective. This will help me to deal with these situations in the future.”

“This unbalanced relationship between doctors and patients is seen also in other professions, for example the relation between the engineer and the construction worker”

“I will take in account what I have learned in this seminar when I will have to see a doctor for myself, relatives or friends

“The discussed issues made me think about which should be the attitude I should have in front of a disease situation”

Question 4 ;What was the most interesting issue for you? Would you recommend repeat this type of seminar for others?

One of the most shocking issues for the students was the existence of patient's rights

“The most interesting was the patient's rights issue”

“I think that in general there is very little information about the rights and duties of the patients, doctors and medical centers”. “I also consider that is strictly necessary to teach those topics as essential subject for the medical students”

“For me the most interesting discussion was about the Classical Hipocrates Oath”

“I would recommend this seminar for everybody, since the people should know their rights as patients. “Many of the things we learn here are unknown for one as well for some doctors. This fact prevents that people can establish a good relationship with the doctors”

“The most interesting was the discussion about the rights and duties of the patients that in our country are ignored”. “We learn something everyday and learning is always useful, the seminar turned to be practical”

“I would recommend offer this seminar to other students that know very little about the discussed topics”

“I was surprised with the numerous of doctors responsibilities that are mentioned Hippocrates' Oath. I would give this seminar again because the medical care is a public problem in our country and that never is taken in account”. The patient-doctor relationship is much deteriorated in Venezuela and this seminar allowed us to awake the sense of our rights and duties as patients.

“Really I cannot say what issue was most interesting than other, because all topics was were very important, and there were many things we ignored”

Discussion and Conclusions

This group of students had the same traditional concepts about the patient-doctor relationship that prevails in the general public. Many of students did not know the existence of the patient's rights including medical students! They thought the doctors should not be questioned at all. This was part of the respect they deserve from part of the patients.

When the real cases were discussed was evident the dislike of the not even relation between patients and doctors. They immediately accepted the concept of equality between patients and doctors, the importance to be informed completely and on time by the doctors in order to take the right decisions concerning their own medical care. The students became very interested in the issues after the discussions, they wanted to transmit them to their other classmates even other career students. They also emphasized to teach the seminar to the medical students and spread the general ideas to the different concept of the equal relationship between doctors and patients to the general community, because they considered the information given in this seminar should not kept just for some few. Some of the students were spontaneously having discussions about the seminar issues with their families, friends or roommates during the seminar period. This very simple and short course introduced important changes in the student's view about how the relation between patients and doctors should be in order to receive a better medical care. They were very receptive to change the traditional conceptions about medical practice and the passive role of patients. All of them expressed they will be in a much better position for the next opportunity they need medical services. They also express that these teachings should be available for all, not only for the medical students but for the general community. Because the pragmatism application without to have to wait to have more money to improve the health care.

This experience is an example how it is possible to change attitudes in the public about the role of patients in their own medical care. It was possible demonstrate how an educated patient can make a difference when he or she needs medical service, because the patient will expect to be informed, will ask questions about everything related with his or her health and in this way may help to the doctors to prevent mistakes and they will receive a more careful medical service at not extra cost.

Health issue is a critical for anybody independently of his or her educational situation and even economical situation. The role of providers of health services and educational institutions should have obligation to educate the community about their rights respect to medical services and more important how they can cooperate with a better medical care for themselves.

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