Reflections: Including Patients in a Healthcare Culture of Safety and Transparency

Sometimes, especially during the hectic and overwhelming days of medical school, it is important to remember why I am pursuing becoming a doctor. My experience at the Telluride East Patient Safety Summer Camp gave me the chance to step back and fully appreciate the myriad interactions that influence a physician’s daily life. This retreat was an interactive learning experience related to health care quality and delivery. Students accepted to the program were given full scholarships to attend. An array of medical students, nurses, and residents attended the camp, which allowed for a great breadth of experiences and knowledge to be shared. The camp was filled with workshops, interactive discussions, small group sessions, and team building activities. The experience allowed me to work with renowned experts in the field including: David Mayer, MD, Paul Levy, PhD, and Richard Corder, MHA, FACHE.

After long discussions about high-reliability organizations, I realized the inappropriateness of developing a system that worked only to prevent humans from making mistakes. Instead, by recognizing human fallibility as an inherent quality, organizations can develop systems that catch and deal with mistakes accordingly. Empowering all levels of healthcare providers to hold the patient’s safety as their top priority will allow a culture where individuals can speak up and ask questions when a patient might be endangered. Currently, the healthcare system only gives providers a snapshot of their patients. Because of this, poor communication can have profound consequences on an individual’s life.

As a future physician, I aspire to be someone who truly listens to those around me, while simultaneously recognizing my own limits and seeking out help when needed. Without recognizing one’s own limits and without making an effort to engage patients, it is far too easy to make decisions that could actually negatively impact a patient’s outcome. Focusing solely on inter-professional teamwork and communication, although crucial, is ineffective if patient engagement is not incorporated.

One method to ensure that healthcare systems are engaging in patient-centered care is to evaluate the level of transparency in all aspects of care. While mistakes and errors are inevitable, they are also incredibly strong teachable moments that should be utilized. Only through transparency can an organization truly embrace a culture of patient safety. I believe that transparency demonstrates a true willingness and desire to learn from mistakes. The real consideration is, does transparency lead to cultural change, or does a complete patient-safety mentality shift need to happen first in order to improve transparency?

When I left the retreat this past July, I felt reenergized and inspired to tackle the aspects of patient care that need improvement. The Telluride camp was a great reminder that my continued pursuit of a medical degree was in order to provide my future patients with the highest quality of care.

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