Erosion of Empathy in Primary Care Trainees

Jacquelyn McRae, PharmD  
*Jefferson College of Population Health, Thomas Jefferson University*

G. Calusi  
*AUSL*

Mengdan Liu  
*Center for Research in Medical Education and Health Care, Thomas Jefferson University*

V. Scognamiglio  
*AUSL*

E. Messina  
*AUSL*

See next page for additional authors

Follow this and additional works at: [https://jdc.jefferson.edu/jcphposters](https://jdc.jefferson.edu/jcphposters)

Part of the Health Services Research Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

**Recommended Citation**

McRae, PharmD, Jacquelyn; Calusi, G.; Liu, Mengdan; Scognamiglio, V.; Messina, E.; Polenzani, L.; and Maio, PharmD, MSPH, Vittorio, "Erosion of Empathy in Primary Care Trainees" (2016). *College of Population Health Posters*. 6.  
[https://jdc.jefferson.edu/jcphposters/6](https://jdc.jefferson.edu/jcphposters/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Jefferson Digital Commons. The Jefferson Digital Commons is a service of Thomas Jefferson University's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). The Commons is a showcase for Jefferson books and journals, peer-reviewed scholarly publications, unique historical collections from the University archives, and teaching tools. The Jefferson Digital Commons allows researchers and interested readers anywhere in the world to learn about and keep up to date with Jefferson scholarship. This article has been accepted for inclusion in College of Population Health Posters by an authorized administrator of the Jefferson Digital Commons. For more information, please contact: JeffersonDigitalCommons@jefferson.edu.
Authors
Jacquelyn McRae, PharmD; G. Calusi; Mengdan Liu; V. Scognamiglio; E. Messina; L. Polenzani; and Vittorio Maio, PharmD, MSPH

This poster is available at Jefferson Digital Commons: https://jdc.jefferson.edu/jcphposters/6
INTRODUCTION

• Empathy outside of the clinical context is oftentimes described as “feelings” or emotionally putting oneself in another’s situation (Halpern, 2014).

• Empathy in patient care is “a predominantly cognitive (as opposed to affective or emotional) attribute that involves an understanding (as opposed to feeling) of patients’ experiences, concerns, and perspectives combined with a capacity to communicate this understanding” (Hojat, 2009).

• Evidence supports that empathic care is associated with better health outcomes, enhanced shared decision making, and higher rates of medication adherence, and lower rates of medical malpractice (Hojat, 2011; Hickson, 2002; Rees, 2012, Del Canale, 2012).

• Despite the positive effects of empathy, physicians struggle with exactly how to display empathy in the patient-provider relationship (Gleicher and Decety, 2012).

• To this end, educating physicians on how to demonstrate empathy in the early stages of their education may be an effective strategy to increasing empathic engagement.

• The evidence shows that, worryingly, empathy among medical students tends to decrease with increased exposure to the healthcare system (Hojat, 2009).

• Compared to studies evaluating empathy in medical students, fewer studies have evaluated empathy in physician residents (Avasarala, 2015; Greenberg, 2015; Olson, 2015).

• Current evidence is conflicting as to whether empathy decreases or is unaffected during residency training (Greenberg, 2015, West, 2007).

RESULTS

Table 1. Demographics for Sample Population (N=98)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean score (SD)</th>
<th>Range of scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>112.7 (12.7)</td>
<td>77-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group, yrs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-28</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>116.8 (11.3)</td>
<td>87-133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;28</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>109.4 (14.4)</td>
<td>77-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>113.5 (11.9)</td>
<td>77-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>110.7 (14.5)</td>
<td>85-133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trainee year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>110.5 (11.6)</td>
<td>87-132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>114.3 (10.1)</td>
<td>83-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>108.4 (12.8)</td>
<td>77-129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>115.2 (11.5)</td>
<td>87-133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100.3 (14.3)</td>
<td>77-140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>116.6 (6.0)</td>
<td>102-120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIMITATIONS

• Our sample included physicians in a single primary care training program therefore, results are specific to this particular residency program and may not be generalizable to primary care trainees across Italy or other geographic regions.

• Our results are from a cross-sectional study and therefore we did not capture the true variation of empathy as trainees progressed in the program.

DISCUSSION

• To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate characteristics linked to empathic care in Italian primary care trainees and adds to the scarce knowledge on this topic.

• Our study showed empathy scores were significantly lower in year 3 of residency training. These results are in agreement with previous evidence that demonstrated that empathy within medical residents significantly declined during matriculation in training programs (Belfini, 2001; Bellini, 2005; West, 2007; Rosen, 2006; Maregione, 2002).

• These results are important because they demonstrate that primary care residents may follow the same phenomenon as medical students and internal medicine residents of decreasing empathy with increased exposure to clinical practice.

• We observed higher empathy scores in women vs. men, although not statistically significant likely due to small sample size (Park, 2015; Hojat, 2002).

• Future studies in larger samples may confirm our results. In addition, future research should utilize a longitudinal analysis of changes in empathy among primary care trainees.

• We urge directors of primary care residency programs to support educational activities to teach trainees strategies for empathic engagement.

REFERENCES

1. McRae J1, Calusi G2, Liu M1, Scognamiglio V1, Messina E2, Polenanz L2, Maio V1.
2. Jefferson Center for Medical Research and Education, Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA 19107 United States.