

Communication Skills Training for Patients and Healthcare Providers: A Proposed Blend of Performance Studies, Theatre and Communication Strategies

Chronic health conditions pose challenges for patients and healthcare providers alike. As rates of diabetes and heart disease climb worldwide health educators have begun to use theatre, now accepted internationally as an effective intervention in infectious disease education, as a tool for teaching people how to understand and manage their chronic diseases. Examples of such programs include diabetes education in Fiji¹ and stroke education in South Africa,² where health educators are building on the previous success of theatre and infectious disease education.

As theatre gains recognition as an effective health teaching tool, it should be explored as a way to reach individuals suffering from chronic health conditions like diabetes and heart disease, with relevant, correct and timely information. As a teaching method,

theatre is particularly useful among low-literacy and low health-literacy populations.³ It engages an audience and participants on a visual, auditory and emotional level, improving the likelihood of information comprehension and retention.³ Accessible information is essential to improving health outcomes, and novel initiatives are necessary to achieving this goal. Improvisational Theatre is a type of theatre during which the performance is created the moment it is performed, requiring participants to remain present, responsive and engaged.⁴ This level of engagement between healthcare providers and patients during discussions about diagnosis, treatment or behavior change increase the likelihood that when a patient leaves an appointment they will retain the correct and necessary information to properly care for their condition.

Based on frameworks from the Communication Accommodation Theory⁵ and Goffman's Theory of Presentation of Self in Everyday Life,⁶ this project hypothesizes that using created or improvised theatre programs will improve self-efficacy in older adults who suffer from chronic ailments and, at the same time, improve communication skills in healthcare providers who work with older patients.

A review of the literature on theatre and health education initiatives, specifically those focused on chronic diseases, revealed implications for improving provider-patient communication about chronic diseases and methods used to create health communication-focused theatre workshops.

All theatre projects identified in the literature review emphasized the need for cultural competence. For example, character interactions on stage must be culturally relevant and appropriate for messages to be effective, and must reflect cultural taboos regarding behavior. Though multiple types of theatre used for communicating about health were identified, Applied Theatre in particular was cited for its efficacy because it sustains information retention through emotions and sensory experience.² The literature review also suggested that improvisational communication techniques could be a useful method for discussing barriers to and strategies for behavior change,⁷ indicating that this technique would be beneficial for chronic disease management.

Based on the outcome of this literature review, proposed next steps include a pilot Health Communication and Improvisational

Figure 1. Types of theatre used in chronic disease health education

Type of Theatre	Disease Process	Location
Applied Theatre (Theater practiced in a specific social context, with participants who have a vested interest in the performance topic) ⁹	Stroke	South Africa ²
Community Theatre (Theatre practiced with the intent of engaging a community in a particular message) ¹	Diabetes	Fiji ¹
Commercial Popular Theatre (Theater produced for the purpose of entertainment) ⁹	HIV	Uganda ⁹
Theatre for Development (Theatre used for the purpose of achieving development goals, a subcategory of Applied Theatre) ⁹	HIV	Uganda ⁹

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Theatre workshop to determine how improvisational theatre techniques can enhance doctor-patient communication regarding chronic disease management within the healthcare system in the United States. In 2012, chronic conditions -- including heart disease, lower respiratory disease, cerebrovascular disease, diabetes and nephritis -- represented 5 of the top 10 causes of death among Americans age 65 and older, and 6 of the top 10 causes of death among those 55 to 64, indicating that new modes of communication are necessary in order to effectively reach them.¹⁰

Workshops would focus on teaching how to use improvisational theatre techniques in the healthcare setting to improve patient engagement. Existing work on Theater and Health Communication suggested

the following curriculum development components for workshops: 1) Establishment of physical space, ground rules and "safe" feeling; 2) Warm-ups: energy and focus, trust work, and bridge work; 3) Improvisation; 4) Activating material, and 5) Performance feedback.¹¹ The review indicated that necessary elements for improvisation exercises include focus, side-coaching, evaluation and points of observation.¹²

Goals for successful curricula include, 1) Creation of safe spaces for dialogue; 2) Exploration of choices and consequences, then practice for real life; 3) Enhancement of communication and decision-making skills; 4) Use of multiple perspectives as a positive tool for problem solving, and 5) Risk-taking in fictional worlds in order to learn to take action in one's own life.¹¹

This literature review was limited by the small number of studies related to the topic of theater and health communication, particularly in the United States. Additionally, the utilization of theater as a method of improving health communication may not be generalizable to all cultures, as self-expression and communication have strong cultural components.

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