Enhancing Empathy in Medical Students

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Enhancing Clinical Empathy

*Empathy is innate, but it can be enhanced or diminished.*
Approach to Teaching Empathy to Medical Students

• Recognize that empathy is present in all medical students.

• The challenge is: “How are we going to give our students the necessary tools to ensure they are more empathic when they finish their training?”

• The method proposed by Slote and Hoffman, “the method of induction,” is not practical as it would require individual mentoring not accessible in most medical schools.

• Thus, a combined more practical approach is needed.
Suggested Approach cont...

• Give students basic didactic instructions on the mechanism of empathy along with the methods that have shown improvement in enhancing empathy.

• This is an ongoing process that should start before, during and after medical school, and also include faculty education.

• The methods could include ‘reminders’ such as those present in the principilism approach, virtue ethics, and care ethics, always recognizing that the foundation is the empathic disposition.
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- Patient Interview Training “The Four Habits”
- Communication Skills Training
- Interpersonal Skills Training “Active Listening”
- Reading and Writing Literature, Poetry and making Art
- Drama or how to act in role. Be careful
- Stress management and meditation
- Exposure to role models. Not enough of them
- Experiential learning. Get sick and you’ll get it

Above all, teach medical students in an atmosphere of care and respect. The goal is to have the students leave medical school more empathic than when they arrived.
Habits of Highly Empathetic People
Try them with strangers, family, friends and colleagues

• Talk with strangers, be curious
• Be an interested inquirer
• Listen hard—and open up, be receptive
• Try another person’s life, from their point of view
• Suspend judgment, try not to profile
• Challenge prejudices, discover commonalities
• Develop an ambitious imagination
• Inspire mass action and social change

Roman Krznaric
Can Empathy Be Measured?

This is the main challenge as we, medical educators, function in an environment where measuring and numbers are required to show effectiveness. There at least 10-12 methods measuring some aspects of empathy but they are all problematic for many reasons.

I do not have an answer for this except to say that waiting to find a way to measure the long term effects of teaching empathy is not the answer.