Foundation Doctors’ Perspective on Balint Group Participation

Dr Alex Chatziagorakis, ST5, Dr Stewart Brown, FY2, Dr Mike Holder, FY1, and Dr Chris Douglas, Consultant Psychiatrist

South West Yorkshire Partnerships NHS Foundation Trust

Introduction

Reflection, driving change in performance and helping avoid pitfalls, is the key to effective continuous professional development. The General Medical Council requires doctors to reflect regularly on their standards of medical practice. Balint groups are a form of reflective practice groups and can promote reflection-in-action. By fostering reflective thinking, they may result in a deeper understanding of the doctor-patient relationship.

The UK Foundation Programme is a two-year generic training programme forming the bridge between medical school and specialist/general practice training. In certain parts of the country, Foundation posts in Psychiatry offer doctors the opportunity to participate in a Balint group.

Our aim is to offer Foundation Year (FY) doctors’ perspective on Balint group participation.

Methods

Two of the authors (SB and MH) are Foundation Year doctors discussing their experience of having participated in a Balint group in Wakefield, where Foundation doctors are required to attend a Balint group during their 4-month Psychiatry placement. The group was attended by up to 12 doctors; there was one leader (CD); it met weekly and lasted for an hour.

Results

The FY doctors described their experience positively. It allowed them to explore their feelings about challenging patients (amongst similar professionals/their colleagues/the team), validating their emotions, and providing them with a safe and constructive environment to vent their frustrations. Ultimately the result was that the treating doctors developed an empathic understanding of their most difficult patients.

This did not only feel therapeutic to the doctors, but also led to being less judgmental and gaining a deeper understanding of their patients, a skill important not only in Psychiatry but also in other specialties. They also valued that the process of reflection was freer in a Balint group than in the more forced reflection that the post-graduate medical curricula encourage.

Their experience, however, was also challenging, due to the doctors’ initial unfamiliarity with the Balint group process, their feelings of vulnerability and needing time to develop a trusting relationship with the other group members. After attending several sessions, it became easier to derive more benefits from the group.

Conclusion

Balint groups can be both beneficial and challenging for Foundation Year doctors. Their benefits echo those already reported by GPs, Psychiatry trainees and other mental health professionals. Our work suggests that these benefits may be transferrable into other specialties that deal with challenging patients.

References


