Teaching medical students about emotions and the doctor patient relationship

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History of teaching about the doctor patient relationship at UCL

- **1958** - Student Psychotherapy Scheme begins at UCH for 1st yr clinical students
- **1969** - Michael Balint runs long term student Balint Group at UCH
- **2004** - Introduction of modified 3 month weekly Student Balint Group at UCH
- **2006** - Student Balint groups go onto UCL medical school curriculum as Student Select Component with 10 groups (100 students per year)
Student Psychotherapy Scheme

- Offered to first clinical year medical students
- Student sees once weekly patient for psychodynamic psychotherapy for one year
- Weekly supervision group with senior member in Department of Psychotherapy
- 10-15 places per year, limited by available supervisors and suitable patients
Student selection

- Introductory talk to all medical students
- Brief interview
- Students need to show commitment and understanding of time and responsibilities involved
- Students excluded if major concerns about their health or personality (rare), or suffered recent stress e.g. bereavement
Patients allocated to SPS

- All referred and assessed in normal way to Dept of Psychotherapy
- All consent to therapy with student
- Patients with serious psychopathology, history of suicide attempts, severe substance misuse excluded
- Patients with anxiety, depression, psychosomatic illnesses or history of bereavements tend to do well
Medical Student Balint groups

- 10 students per group
- 2 Balint group leaders – one Balint-trained GP, one Medical Psychotherapist
- Weekly meetings for 11-12 weeks
- Students not pre-selected
- Students write reflective essay at end
- Demand and capacity to run 10 groups (100 students) per year
Common themes of discussion
(Suckling, 2005)

- The students’ role
- Confidentiality
- Consent
- The very ill patient
- Death and dying
- Revulsion towards patients
- History taking
- Professional boundaries
- The student patient relationship
- The doctors’ behaviour
Student feedback on Balint groups (Suckling, 2005)

Participation in Balint Groups:

- increased students’ confidence
- improved their communication skills
- encouraged whole patient medicine
- encouraged reflection
- provided support
- increased their enjoyment of their work
What are we trying to teach?

- A special type of listening
- Tolerating confusion, uncertainty, silences, emotional distress, and lack of therapeutic progress
- Appreciating how the patient’s history of attachment may influence his compliance with treatment
- Acknowledging the emotional impact on the student/doctor of patients and how understanding these emotional reactions may enhance diagnosis and management of the patient’s illness
What are we trying to teach?

- Discerning the attitudes and roles that the patient unconsciously attributes to the doctor
- Appreciation of the need to maintain appropriate interpersonal boundaries
- Increasing the student’s capacity for psychological mindedness and empathy
- A ‘whole person’ approach to medicine
Effective doctor patient communication is associated with:

- Patient satisfaction
- Compliance with treatment
- Symptom improvement
- Reduction in psychological distress
- Patients’ perception of physician competence
- Fewer complaints and lawsuits against doctors
Researching the SPS and Balint groups

- Sturgeon (1985) - Differences between students doing SPS and those not; influence on career choice
- Suckling (2005) - Qualitative research on Balint groups, themes explored, student feedback
- 2 controlled trials evaluating:
  - Career choice of participants of SPS (Yakeley et al, 2004)
  - Students’ learning about the doctor-patient relationship in both SPS and Balint groups (Yakeley et al, 2011)
Who wants to do psychiatry?

- Large retrospective controlled trial
- 200 students who participated in SPS between 1982 and 1992 cf 200 controls matched for each year
- Questionnaire asking about career choice, and for those who did SPS, whether they were already interested in psychiatry as a career
Results

- Those students who did SPS were significantly more likely to choose a career in psychiatry than (25.8%) those students who did not do SPS (2.6%).

- Those students who did SPS, even if they were not already interested in psychiatry (14.3%), were significantly more likely to choose a career in psychiatry than those students who did not do the Scheme (1.6%).
A randomized controlled trial to evaluate 2 psychodynamic teaching approaches for medical students to learn about the doctor patient relationship.


Compared students in three groups:

- **Group 1:** SPS - 10 students Jan 2006-Jan 2007
- **Group 2:** Balint Group 1 - 10 students Jan 2006-April 2006
- **Group 3:** Balint Group 2 (Partial Control) -10 students April 2006-June 2006

Questionnaires administered at:

- Baseline – before interventions
- 3 months
- 1 year
## Questionnaire

1. What effect can the relationship between a doctor or a student and patient have on the patient’s overall care?

2. How may a doctor or a student’s feelings be affected by a patient?

3. How may a student use those feelings in relation to the patient?

4. How do you cope with your anxiety and uncertainty in your work with patients?

5. Do you feel that the relationship between the doctor or student and the patient should be an equal one? If not, why?

6. Why is it important to understand the nature of the patient’s attachment to the doctor or the student?

7. How do you recognise emotion in a patient when it is not verbalised?
Main findings

- Significant improvement in scores in all three groups at 1 year compared to the beginning.

- At 3 months, 2 groups participating in SPS or Balint Group show trend not quite reaching significance towards higher scores compared to partial control group.

- Suggests that teaching interventions increased knowledge of doctor patient relationship in SPS and Balint Grp1 compared to partial control students in Balint Grp 2 not receiving interventions in 1st 3 months.
Limitations to study

- Questionnaire tested knowledge only at an intellectual level.

- Our ideal answers to questions may have assumed a greater potential in students for learning about doctor patient relationship than possible after so short an exposure to psychotherapeutic teaching.

- Inter-rater reliability: observers had different overall mean scores with less than ideal correlation between scores.
Conclusion and future directions

SPS and Student Balint Groups may help:

- Students to learn about the Doctor Patient Relationship
- Students to learn about emotions in medical illness
- Support students at time of transition
- Increase recruitment into psychiatry
- Promote a more psychotherapeutic psychiatry

Encourage all medical schools to set up similar teaching methods and evaluate/research them