

Impact of Transpersonal Connectedness Between Physician and Patient in Hansen's Disease

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Abstract

Transpersonal connectedness within the physician-patient relationship is the ability of the physician to understand the feelings of the patient. This empathy is important for the physician to understand what the illness means to the patient. It can be an essential aspect of the physician's therapy as illustrated in this case presentation of a patient with Hansen's disease.

Key words: *Hansen's disease, physician-patient relationship, connectional experience.*

A Case History

A young college student suddenly observed the presence of hypo-pigmented patches on his eyebrows, around the left cheek and part of the nose. He is not able to close his eyelids on the left side, unable to feel any sensation on the affected side and does not understand the cause for the loss of hair from his eyebrow. He visits a dermatologist. The dermatologist, after doing his routine investigations, informs the patient that he may be suffering from a kind of leprosy known as tuberculoid leprosy. The loss of hair and numbness felt on the affected side are due to the infection, caused by *mycobacterium leprae*, damaging the nerve supplying the eyebrow, a part of his nose, mouth and face in general.

The doctor informs the young man that the degeneration to the nerve cannot be reversed, but the infection can be controlled from spreading further. The patient needs to be on drugs for a long period of time.

The words of the physician upset the patient. He shrinks into a shell. He does not talk to his friends and relatives as before. The boisterous young man

becomes melancholic. He starts asking questions like: "Of all the diseases, why should I get such a disease. How do I live with such a disease and face life positively?"

He loses interest in his studies. He feels quite depressed and weak. He is afraid to share his problems with anyone as his disease carries a social stigma. During his regular visits to the physician he is not able to find answers to his mental agony, though he is able to control his physical symptoms with drug therapy.

The dermatologist perceives the young man's mental agony. He takes the patient to a leprosy hospital and lets him see different types of patients admitted with more severe forms of the disease. After the visit to the ward the physician informs the patient that he has a milder form of the disease and was diagnosed early enough to control the infection, provided he is disciplined in taking the drugs and in following the advice of the doctor. The physician's advice, that the mind can make hell or heaven out of life, pumps new vigour and meaning into the patient's life. These simple words bring a connectedness with the physician and prepares the patient to face life with confidence and interest.

Quite a sizeable population suffers from Hansen's disease. Long term therapy, hyperthermia, sporadic episodes of hemolysis and social stigma are some of the common problems faced by these patients. The control of the disease demands longterm medication

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and a long-lasting relationship between the patient and the physician.¹

Recently there has been discussion about the importance of the connexional dimension of the physician-patient relationship as playing a vital role in therapy.² In the word connexional, "co" stands for togetherness and "nexus" represents the binding together of parts to form a whole. A drive to reach beyond the boundaries of "self", to feel connected to other people and the world, bringing a sense of belonging in the world (i.e. "meaning") and a feeling of connectedness to others, explains the connexional experience.² Such connexional experiences, borne out of the physician's intense feelings of awareness of the patient's feelings and hardships, and the patient's feeling of being profoundly understood by the physician, may prove therapeutic in chronic illnesses such as Hansen's disease.

The connexional dimension of therapy therefore demands the need to analyze the biopsychosocial model of illness.³ Such a model reminds physicians to consider illness within the context of the whole of the patient's life, family, work, community and culture. The physician must respond to disruptions at each of these levels. Disruptions at such levels can interfere with one's security, challenge one's sense of control over one's destiny, and above all, produce feelings of alienation from self, family, community and God. Further, pain, loss of function and distress due to a disease disrupt the ordinary means of making contact, thus intensifying the isolation of every day existence. Usual coping responses may be weakened or overwhelmed, and the patient may be left hopeless, powerless or demoralized.⁴

These bio-psycho disruptions brought by the disease demand that the patient be treated for both his physical problem and the accompanying psychosocial disturbances. Hansen's disease is one such disease which needs to be considered for such therapy.

The case history demonstrates how the sudden realization by the patient of having contracted a disease such as Hansen's shatters his ego. Being a college student, the disease has a telling effect upon his physical and social well-being. The strict therapy schedule and the accompanying psycho-social problems bring about a disruption at the personal, family, society and community levels. The disease appears to threaten his security, produces a severe form of alienation from his family, friends and education.⁴ The world which was once full of life and hope, looks bleak, impotent and hopeless to him.

The timely intervention by the physician in the form of persuasive words, and the demonstration of concern by the doctor revitalized the young student's mind and put him back onto the track of his routine life. The carefully worded message that "the mind can make heaven or hell out of life" conveyed by the

physician did the magic for the patient and prepared him to fight the disease with positive thinking. These words brought a feeling of connectedness with the doctor. Being heard and understood by the physician reduced his feelings of isolation and eased despair. This is the very heart of healing required for such patient.⁵ This deep, transpersonal connectedness between the patient and the doctor is comforting and therapeutic. Such caring acknowledgement of a patient's suffering legitimizes his painful experiences and gives him a feeling of personal integrity, wholeness and value.⁶

The most difficult and trying period for the patient is to find the meaning for his problem by trying to find an explanation for his getting such a disease. Social stigma prevents him from discussing his problem with others. But the timely intervention by the physician prevents the patient from falling into a crisis. The doctor's gesture of taking the patient to a leprosy ward to show him to more severe forms of the disease, helps the patient to regain his confidence and discover the personal meaning, dignity and value of life. It taught him that illness, loss and death are parts of normal human experience. Those who fight such illness and accept the reality of loss and death, find a fuller meaning of life, wholeness, hope and ultimate transcendence over their condition.⁷

The connectedness between the physician and patient in the case history helps the student to fight the disease and regain control over his life. There are thousands of patients suffering from Hansen's disease who need such a transpersonal relationship to get the full benefit of therapy. Hansen's disease is still considered a socially despicable disease in many countries, in spite of being advertised as a harmless disease by the medical and governmental media. The problem faced by such a patient in such a society becomes unique and demands physical and spiritual healing.

As the connexional dimension involves mutual interaction, the physical and social well-being of the patient after such therapy gives a sense of satisfaction and adds a measure of contribution of extra service by the physician involved in such therapy. Medicine is considered a very prestigious profession and the most ideal one from the point of view of many youngsters.

Diseases like leprosy which are chronic, ego-shattering and socially crippling need the adoption of transpersonal relationship and advocacy of a transformed method of therapy wherein the physician enters into the world of the patient and perceives the illness through the patient's eyes. Such a perception can only be achieved through a healing relationship. Thus, an establishment of a healing relationship is a basic clinical task which is as vital as diagnosis and biotechnical treatment.

It is true that following the Renaissance,

Descartes' assertion of the duality of mind and body⁸ paved the way for enabling medicine to concentrate on the physical healing of the body. Exclusive attention to bodily healing may not be adequate for patients suffering from Hansen's disease. It is relevant to quote and explain "Tawhīd", the Islamic principle of the absolute unity of Allāh which binds all truth to one source.

A Muslim physician conducting an enquiry to seek the truth about a disease believes that such an enquiry is a branch of one and the same discipline, namely the discovery of the truth which is Allāh's.⁹ This unity and integrity of intellectual pursuit has helped to preserve the wholesomeness of both the Muslim's scientific and ethical pursuits encased in the religious doctrines.

Connexional experience is characterized by a sensation of unusual connectedness to a phenomenon of nature, an activity. This type of connectedness, stemming out of a physician-patient relationship reaching out to nature, is therefore an incumbent trait of a true Muslim physician.

Medicine is a religious necessity for society. The patient is the master and the doctor is at his service. This is clearly illustrated by Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH), who said: The strongest should follow the pace of weakest, for he is the one to be considered deciding the pace of travel.¹⁰

According to Islam a physician is a mere vehicle of Allāh Who cures illness through the doctor.

'You are a friend, God is the physician.'¹¹

The connexional dimension of therapy needed for curing chronic illnesses, including Hansen's disease, is one tenet of the Islamic belief in rational thinking and sane judgement. Thus, the duality of the mind and body has precipitated clinical skills trying to cure the bodily illness but leaving the mind far behind. In Islam, with its unity of truth, the unity of Allāh re-

mains the cure to correct manmade catastrophe in the domain of nature and the tragedy felt in the sphere of morals. Let Muslim physicians act as guiding stars of a truly healing community to help cure such patients afflicted with leprosy all over the world. The world believes in what it witnesses more than in what it reads or hears.

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