

06. Narrative Medicine Workshops Promote Empathy and Humanistic Development in First-Year Medical Students: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Background: Empathy is a cornerstone of effective medical care, associated with improved patient outcomes, satisfaction, and physician well-being. Despite its importance, studies demonstrate that empathy declines during medical training, including in the preclinical years. Narrative Medicine (NM), which cultivates narrative competence—the ability to recognize, interpret, and be moved by patients' stories—has been shown to support empathy, reflection, and professional identity formation. However, most NM interventions occur over extended periods, posing challenges for integration into time-constrained medical curricula. This mixed-methods study evaluates whether brief Narrative Medicine workshops can enhance empathy in first-year medical students and explores their feasibility for curricular implementation.

Methods: First-year medical students participated in optional 60-minute Narrative Medicine workshops, co-facilitated by an experienced Narrative Medicine practitioner and a physician faculty member. Sessions included an overview of Narrative Medicine, close reading of a poem or short story, prompted reflective writing, and group discussion. Empathy was measured pre- and post-workshop using the Jefferson Scale of Empathy–Medical Student Version (JSE-S) and analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore student experiences and perspectives; transcripts were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis with iterative codebook development.

Results: JSE-S empathy scores increased significantly following workshop participation ($n=27$, $p=0.001$). Qualitative analysis ($n=10$) identified themes of workshops facilitating perspective-taking and empathy development, reconnecting students with their sense of purpose in medicine, and cultivating peer connection and community, along with a strong desire for curricular integration.

Conclusion: Narrative Medicine workshops were associated with increased empathy among first-year medical students and represent a feasible, promising approach to fostering humanistic development in medical education. Larger, longitudinal studies are warranted to evaluate the durability of these effects.

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THEME	PARTICIPANT QUOTES
Perspective-Taking & Empathy	"(From listening to others during writing discussions of the workshop) I became very cognizant- that I really only know a very small sliver of the whole identity of each person...From hearing classmates during the sharing part made me hyper aware that there is so much to still learn about so many of my classmates even though I see them everyday. This is something the workshop made me realize."
	"(Narrative Medicine workshops) make people think about things from different perspectives. It gives them a more wholesome overall point of view on thinking about things, about their patients, about themselves, about anything in life."
Reconnect with Purpose in Medicine	"This experience reminded me to stay grounded in patient-centered care—doing right by my patients in whatever way best supports their needs. It reinforced the importance of listening to patients and speaking with them, not to them. More broadly, it brought me back to my original sense of purpose in medicine: a commitment to service and caring for others. In difficult moments, it helps me reconnect with the motivation that led me to pursue medicine in the first place."
	"Medical students can become very metrics-driven and lose sight of why we're here and what kind of doctor we want to be. The biggest value of the workshops is the opportunity to slow down and reflect—on what it took to get here and what we hope to do as physicians. Without that reflection, it's easy to burn out and forget why we chose this path in the first place."
Community & Peer Connection	"I really appreciated the participation from my classmates. It's one of the only times that I get to really see them outside of a traditional STEM context. It's really cool to see how they think and analyze that's not purely medicine or science-based."
	"It's really cool that (participating in these workshops) branches out into conversations outside of that space (with other classmates). A little community has been created. These people that I get to see and pass in the hallways now, I now know that's someone who really cares because I heard them talk about it just an hour ago. It's a good sense of community that I'm finding in my own school now."
Reflective, Supportive Environment	"I felt like we were doing it (NM workshop) in a collaborative, team way. It was awesome. It kept my attention the whole time. I felt supported. I felt comfortable. I had fun." "(We) don't have many situations (at medical school) where we can openly discuss, be vulnerable and share how I perceive things or my experiences. With consistency, it could really be even more grounding and validating."
Desire for Curricular Integration	for "I really can't say there is a class at medical school that correlates to the same level as the Workshop in terms of emotional depth and reflective capacity. They (medical school classes) don't quite come as close. I wish it (NM Workshop) were a more consistent part of my pre-clerkship experience."