***Changed Forever*: Narrative Reflection in the 3rd Year Internal Medicine Clerkship**

Cynthia A. Burns, MD, FACP

K. Patrick Ober, MD & Ann Lambros, PhD

Wake Forest School of Medicine

Background:

The third year of the medical school exposes students, for the first time on a daily basis, to the unique sights, sounds and situations that constitute direct patient care. Students meet patients who will change them forever and encounter situations they will never forget.

The purpose of written narrative reflection is that the ability to reflect on significant personal experiences may enable medical students to (1) become more effective and fulfilled physicians with increased empathy towards patients and colleagues and (2) decrease physician burn out by nurturing constructive strategies for handling the intensity of our professional experience.

Methods:

I am fortunate enough to be the Clerkship Director in Internal Medicine at my institution, and in that role, I ask each student write a narrative reflection about a significant clinical event that he/she has experienced during the third year. I explain to them that I’d like them to reflect on an event during their third year that has changed them personally and changed the way that they will practice medicine, something they will remember for the rest of their lives. We then meet in small groups to discuss their reflections. The hours that I spend in these discussions are some of the most important and meaningful of my days. They bare their souls –burly twenty five year olds weep over patients who are too young to die. They tell of waltzing with patients who haven’t danced in decades, in the harsh light of the cardiac care unit. They share stories of personal strength that would amaze you. They write of small victories and lost opportunities, unwinnable battles and ambiguous choices, of care they are proud of and care they are not. I never fail to be humbled by their bravery in sharing these stories with their colleagues and me, and also by their power for self assessment and reflection. Through it all is woven the thread of humanism that transforms a physician into a great physician.

Goals:

It is my goal to analyze these narrative essays for themes and content involving components of professionalism: altruism, accountability, excellence, duty, honor, integrity, respect, and a personal commitment to lifelong learning.[[1]](#footnote-1)

My long term goal is to make my analysis available to the medical education community, to allow for collective reflection on the common themes of professionalism development that third year medical students encounter, with a global goal of expanding professionalism curricula to address these themes directly.

Duration of project: 7 years and counting

How project will be evaluated:

Analysis of the student narratives will be qualitative, analyzing for professionalism development themes. Analysis will take into account whether the clerkship was eight (inpatient experience only) or twelve weeks (inpatient and ambulatory experiences combined) in duration and whether the students completed the clerkship early or late in their third years

Projected impact:

The impact on the 3rd year medical students is ongoing as they reflect on the significant clinical events that have changed the people they are and the physicians they are becoming. I also plan to find a mechanism to return the narrative reflection essays to each student when he/she are finishing residency training to provide each former student with an additional opportunity to reflect on what moved them as a student and how that compares to their current stage of training.

The impact on the medical education community will be to add to the literature regarding the role narrative reflection plays in professional development, as well as explore themes that can be directly addressed in professionalism development curricula.

**Update, February 2016:**

The Wake Forest School of Medicine Office of Medical Education graciously offered to provide the qualitative statistical analysis of the data that has been collected since 2007 by their statistical team with funding from their budget. Analysis should begin in the coming months. The essays took longer than expected to be transcribed by a freelance transcriptionist, but the process is now complete. The Office of Medical Education has recently hired a new statistician, and analysis will begin as soon as possible after this new hire is oriented to the position and able to proceed. I hope to be able to start work on the manuscript this spring.

I will be returning the essays to each former student as they graduate from their residency programs. There are not many to return in the Class of 2008 or 2009, likely due to the fact that I had not yet thought of how powerful it would be to send them back, and as such, didn’t tell them to include their names if they wanted the essay back. A letter will be sent with the original essay to each student with suggestions for continued reflective activity. The Office of Alumni Affairs was able to provide me the most recent mailing addresses for my former students.

**Financial Report**: $2500.00 funded transcription fees.

1. The University of Kansas *“Professionalism Initiative”*, <http://www.kumc.edu/som/professionalism.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)