

Compassionate Care: The importance of a systematic humane approach

Medical care has been criticized over the last few decades due to a perceived dehumanization of care. In response, the medical community has encouraged the adoption of a compassionate care approach. Compassionate care, as defined by the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare, involves recognition of a patient's concerns, pain, or suffering, coupled with acknowledgement and relational action to address the conditions. Integral to this process is an understanding of the importance of building a relationship with the patient based on trust, respect, and recognizing the patient's active role in the recovery process.¹

Care that is compassionate and collaborative is based on: (1) the ability to experience and to act on one's compassion; (2) the ability to collaborate, communicate and partner with patients and family members to the extent they need and desire; (3) the commitment of all who provide and support healthcare to communicate and collaborate with each other; and (4) the resilience and wellbeing of professional and family caregivers.² This framework aims to improve healthcare quality, enrich the patient and family experience, and support clinician wellbeing.

Since its opening in 2012, Clínica Verde has adopted compassionate, high-touch care as part of the institutional culture and considers it to be one of their most valuable assets to accomplish better health outcomes. At Clínica Verde clinicians have a compassionate care mindset and view themselves as "servants" rather than "experts," treating those in need with dignity and respect. Clinic surveys indicate that this approach resonates with patients and employees who consistently rate the "quality of care" as what brings them back to Clínica Verde and what distinguishes Clínica Verde from other healthcare options.

Benefits of Compassionate Care

A compassionate care approach is associated with reductions in the number of mistakes in diagnosis and treatment, higher levels of treatment adherence, a better understanding of a patient's health conditions, and patients who are more involved in decision-making.³ Patients who are more actively involved in their healthcare report higher levels of trust in healthcare providers and more commitment to their care.^{3,4} In hospitals that implement compassion practices, patients are less likely to acquire a hospital condition, including foreign objects retained after surgery, air embolisms, blood incompatibility, and catheter-associated urinary tract infections. Patients also

¹ Batson CD. *Altruism in humans*. New York, NY:Oxford University Press; 2011 p11-32

² Recommendations from a Conference on Advancing Compassionate, Person- and Family-Centered Care Through Interprofessional Education for Collaborative Practice, Atlanta, Georgia, October 30 – November 1, 2014.

³ Lown, B.A., Rosen, J. & Marttila, J. (2011). An agenda for improving compassionate care: A survey shows about half of patients say such care is missing. *Health Aff*. 30 (9), pp. 1772-1778.

⁴ Ahluwalia, S.C., Levin, J.R., Lorenz, K.A. & Gordon, H.S. (2011). Missed opportunities for advance care planning communication during outpatient clinic visits. *J Gen Intern Med*, 27 (4), pp. 445-451.

have lower acute myocardial infarction admissions and 30-day risk-adjusted mortality rates.⁵

Another way compassionate care can improve outcomes is by enabling clinicians who adopt such practices to provide individualized patient care.⁶ Individualized patient care is associated with greater patient satisfaction and better health results, particularly when patients are experiencing a loss or coping with emotionally distressing news.^{7,8}

Compassionate care can impact clinicians' outlook and improve institutional performance. Clinicians who provide compassionate care benefit from positive mental health effects.⁹ Additionally, according to a report by the Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare, hospitals known for their commitment to compassionate care have lower staff turnover, higher retention, recruitment of more highly qualified staff, greater patient loyalty and reduced costs from shorter lengths of stay, lower rates of rehospitalization, better health outcomes, and fewer costly procedures. In addition, they found that caregivers who are able to express compassion for patients, families, and each other experience higher job satisfaction, less stress, and a greater sense of teamwork.¹⁰

A compassionate care approach is particularly important in poor rural communities, like the community that Clínica Verde serves, because patients may lack the knowledge to make informed decisions and they often have less trust in the healthcare system. To better serve such communities, providers need to understand their priorities and limitations, and the relationships between health, poverty, education, and how personal biases may affect care.¹¹

Constraints to Providing Compassionate Care

Stress is one of the major constraints to compassionate care.⁹ The desire of clinicians to provide compassionate care often conflicts with institutional stress to optimize the use of resources and time. Stressful environments can induce compassion fatigue that may lead to a reduction in clinician attentiveness.¹² Furthermore, healthcare providers working in stressful environments that affect their health and psychological wellbeing

⁵ McClelland, L.E. & Vogus, T.J. (2014). Compassion Practices and HCAHPS: Does Rewarding and Supporting Workplace Compassion Influence Patient Perceptions? *Health Serv Res* 49(5), pp. 1670-1683.

⁶ Lilius, J.M., Worline, M. C., Dutton, J.E, Kanov, J.M. & Maitlis, S. (2011). Understanding Compassion Capacity. *Hum Relat* 64 (7), pp. 873-899.

⁷ Wool, C., Repke, JT, Woods, A.B. (2016). Parent reported outcomes of quality of care and patient satisfaction in the context of life-limiting fetal diagnosis. *J Maternal Fetal Neonatal Med.* 29, pp. 1-23.

⁸ McClelland, L.E. & Vogus, T.J. (2014). Compassion Practices and HCAHPS: Does Rewarding and Supporting Workplace Compassion Influence Patient Perceptions? *Health Serv Res* 49(5), pp. 1670-1683.

⁹ Crawford, P., Brown, B., Kvangarsnes, M., & Gilbert, P. (2014). The design of compassionate care. *J Clin Nurs* 23, pp. 3589-3599.

¹⁰ Building Compassion into the Bottom Line: The Role of Compassionate Care and Patient Experience in 35 U.S. Hospitals and Health Systems. A Schwartz Center for Compassionate Healthcare White Paper. <http://www.theschwartzcenter.org/media/Building-Compassion-into-the-Bottom-Line.pdf>

¹¹ Jarrell, K., Ozymy, J., Gallagher, J., Hagler, D. Corral, C. & Hagler, A. (2014). Constructing the foundations for compassionate care: How service-learning affects nursing students' attitudes towards the poor. *Nurse Educ Pract*, 14 (3), pp 299-303.

¹² Rothschild, B. & Rand, M. (2006). Help for the helper: The psychophysiology of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. *W.W. Norton*, pp. 253.

may eventually change how they approach and treat patients.¹³ Clinicians may find it easier to have an analytical perspective rather than emotional perspective, which can make adopting a compassionate approach difficult for some providers.¹⁴

Organizations that reduce work stress and support a positive staff experience provide more opportunities for therapeutic relationship development and compassionate care.^{15,16} In such organizations providers are more likely to have compassionate care for their patients. Institutional support includes a reduction in work-related stress, for example by decreasing patient loads, increasing provider resources, providing emotional support for trauma, and encouraging professional collaboration. Institutional support also includes employee education about ways to implement compassionate care.^{17, 18,19}

Compassion is often believed to be an innate ability when it is, in fact, a skill that can be taught and learned. Any healthcare institution can introduce a compassionate care approach, but implementing it requires commitment and the establishment of an institutional culture around compassion.

Clínica Verde's Compassionate Care Approach

Clínica Verde's goal is to train and coach each staff member in values-based service and delivery, using compassion at each step of the care process. By understanding patients' concerns, empathizing with them, and supporting their emotional, social, and cultural needs, clinicians are motivated to holistically address their health concerns and partner with them to develop the best healthcare plan.

Clínica Verde incorporates compassionate care principles into their written Clinic Values by including the following statements: 1) Treat the poorest of the poor as if they were royalty: I am a servant of the poor; 2) Support the success of my co-workers: I am part of a team and I will work with them to achieve excellence.

In addition to adopting compassionate care principles into their written values, Clínica Verde promotes compassionate care by implementing the following practices:

¹³ Seppala, E.M., Hutcherson, C.A., Nguyen, D.T.H., Dot, J.R. & Ross, J.J. (2014). Loving-kindness meditation: A tool to improve healthcare provider compassion, resilience, and patient care. *Journal of Compassionate Health Care*, 1 (5). Information retrieved from <https://jcompassionatehc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40639-014-0005-9>

¹⁴ Gustin, W. & Wagner, L. (2013). The butterfly effect of caring-clinical nursing teachers' understanding of self-compassion as a source to compassionate care. *Stand J Caring Sci*, 27(1), pp. 175-183.

¹⁵ McClelland, L.E. & Vogus, T.J. (2014). Compassion Practices and HCAHPS: Does Rewarding and Supporting Workplace Compassion Influence Patient Perceptions? *Health Serv Res* 49(5), pp. 1670-1683.

¹⁶ Crawford, P., Brown, B., Kvangarsnes, M., & Gilbert, P. (2014). The design of compassionate care. *J Clin Nurs* 23, pp. 3589-3599.

¹⁷ Lilius, J.M., Worline, M. C., Dutton, J.E, Kanov, J.M. & Maitlis, S. (2011). Understanding Compassion Capacity. *Hum Relat* 64 (7), pp. 873-899.

¹⁸ Rothschild, B.& Rand, M. (2006). Help for the helper: The psychophysiology of compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. *W.W. Norton*, pp. 253

¹⁹ Straughair, C. (2013). Exploring compassion: implications for contemporary nursing. Part 2. *BR J Nurs* 21 (4), pp. 239-244.

Conduct community outreach. Outreach enables the community to view Clínica Verde as a safe space where all individuals can receive medical services from staff members who care about them. Outreach also enables clinicians to better understand socio-economic factors affecting patients. Clínica Verde staff members perform community visits a minimum of three times each month.

Build a strong team with a stable support system. Strengthening clinical teams prevents burnout and creates effective feedback mechanisms through which the team can enhance the service continuously. Among the strategies used to achieve this are weekly meetings and further training in compassionate care. A collaborative work environment also builds resilience, encourages institutional harmony and aims to reduce work-related stress.

Understand and employ mechanisms to improve treatment adherence. Clinicians' language and tone, and the amount of time devoted to patients may impact relationships built between patients and healthcare providers; these factors may affect treatment adherence.

Welcome companions and family members at the clinic. Welcoming and acknowledging caregivers' presence and role as a support system creates a stronger relationship with the clinic's staff. Enabling family members and companions to be active participants in the process and ensuring clear and respectful communication is key.

Provide preventive health education. Health education, including lectures, workshops and preventive health programs, gives patients the tools to care for themselves and their families.

Clínica Verde's commitment to compassionate care has deepened the impact of their work. This approach has enabled Clínica Verde to build trust with the community and the patients they serve. Better relationships and communication improve patients' understanding of their condition and self-efficacy over their treatment. Through these mechanisms, compassionate care can affect treatment adherence and clinical follow-up and therefore improve health outcomes. Compassionate care practices may also reduce stress and anxiety and patients' overall wellbeing. In addition, compassionate and collaborative care builds clinicians' resilience and facilitates effective teamwork. Ultimately, this approach enables Clínica Verde to improve health outcomes for the community they serve.