

The 32nd OUSL General Convocation Address 2019

Prof. Saroj Jayasinghe

MBBS (Col), MD (Col), MRCP (UK), MD (Bristol), PhD (Col), FRCP(Lond), FCCP

Chair Professor of Medicine and Founder Head, Department of Medical Humanities, University of Colombo.

Hon. Consultant Physician, National Hospital of Sri Lanka.

Compassion and The Professional: Two Sides of The Same Coin?

Honorable Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Deans, Heads of Departments, Distinguished Academic Staff Members and Administrative Staff, Graduating students, Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for the invitation and granting me this honor to speak to your graduates at this convocation.

To the graduates gathered here, my heartfelt congratulations to all those who receive their degrees today at the convocation ceremony. You are embarking on a professional career or have advanced in your profession with a further degree. We are here today to celebrate your achievements, to inspire you, and to wish you the very best in all your future endeavors.

Outline

The topic of my address is ***Compassion and the Professional***. In the next 15 minutes I will first define the term ‘compassion’ and describe its relevance to professionals. I will then describe a few concerns about compassion in relation to professional education and ways of enhancing compassion through education. My arguments will be supported by medical research. I will end by summarizing what we hope to do in the newly formed Department of Medical Humanities of which I am the founder head.



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Introduction

There is considerable overlap in the term's sympathy, empathy and compassion. Sympathy is feeling sorry for a person. Empathy refers to the capacity to resonate with others' emotional states or the ability to feel the way the other person feels. This is irrespective of whether it is happiness or sadness. One response in such an instance is 'empathic distress': a strong aversion or dislike to the suffering of others. This is associated with a desire to withdraw from a situation in order to protect oneself from negative feelings. The other response is compassion, a feeling of concern for the other person's suffering accompanied by the motivation to help.

For the purposes of this Convocation Address compassion is defined as a feeling that arises in an individual who witnesses another's suffering and is motivated to help. It has the following four components: (a) Cognitive (an awareness of suffering); (b) Affective (emotionally moved by suffering); (c) Intention (a wish to relieve that suffering) and is then motivated to help the person in distress. There is evidence that these emotions are seen in evolution and probably as old as mammals and birds.

Recent studies using functional MRIs have shown that there are different networks stimulated with these states.

Why do you need compassion in your professional career?

The previous section outlined a biological basis for compassion. What then are the reasons to need compassion in our professional careers? I can think of three main reasons. Firstly, your professional life will require you to constantly interact with people from different walks of life. You will meet people as part of your professional duties, listen to them, speak to them and help them through their difficulties or help guide their lives. This is common to nursing, laboratory technologists, pharmacists and managers alike. Therefore, you will face situations which trigger responses of compassion, sympathy or empathy.

Secondly, if your interactions are compassionate, your patient will feel happier and it increases patient satisfaction, and adherence to

medicine. Furthermore, there are reports of compassion accelerating patient recovery from diseases.

Thirdly, compassion is important for your health. The more compassionate you are, the less burnout there is. All those who scream hatred in the media from whichever side, are destined to be unhappy and die early!

Compassion and the professional

Having introduced these topics, why are we concerned about compassion? The main concern is that studies show a decline in compassion-empathy during professional education. In other words, professional training makes students less humane. This has been shown in numerous studies across different disciplines.

There are several reasons for the decline in empathy or compassion in the medical profession: poor role models, students experiencing bullying by more senior staff, facing ground realities that are counter to idealism we have as students, a high workload, poor psycho-social support, and not knowing how to address empathic distress.

Enhancing compassion

Compassion can be enhanced by yourself and at the institutional level.

Individual level:

At an individual level one needs to overcome empathic distress (and other emotions of failure and helplessness). Functioning as a team and sharing distress and happy emotions with colleagues helps immensely. Non-judgmentally listening to each other's sadness tends to alleviate distress.

The second measure is to reduce the intensity of empathic distress. One could self-reflect and understand one's own emotional reaction and help the patient or the relatives alleviate their distress. It is an attempt to switch towards more action to alleviate suffering (rather than ruminating on their suffering). This is done while acknowledging their pain and distress. This prosocial motivation to help is a feature of compassion which helps to overcome empathic distress.

The third measure is to cultivate self-compassion. Studies on psychological therapists have found that providing compassionate care to others in the absence of self-compassion, leads to increased stress and burnout. These skills can be learnt through training programmes such as Compassionate Mind Training that use contemplative approaches or through meditation-related techniques such as 'loving kindness training', a mental practice carried out in silence that focuses on the cultivation of friendliness towards a series of imagined persons ('Metta' meditation).

Institutional level

At an institutional level, there are several methods proposed to improve empathy-compassion. We in the Department of Medical Humanities have begun to introduce some of these for the first time to our medical curriculum. Some of these maybe relevant to the Open University to consider in their curriculum.

Narrative-Based Learning

The objective is to write a narration or 'a novel' about the patient's life story. The emphasis is not arriving at a diagnosis, but to reflect on the emotions felt by the students. These are explored further in workshop format. The neurological basis of these emotions felt, including empathic distress and compassion are discussed. Students are then introduced to methods of coping with distress and development of compassion.

In this assignment students visit the hospital or clinic in small groups of 5 or 6 students. The idea is to meet a human being who has come for an illness and listen to their story. You should make the person feel at ease, allow them to tell their story, listen to the story with minimal interruption and obtain information of the whole person.

Arts and illness

Artists are considered to be those most sensitive to the humane aspects of our lives. They are able to view and describe lives, events or objects from novel or different angles. Artists have therefore made touching and sensitive contributions to the world of medicine, by describing the humane angle of illness or injury. There are numerous

examples of movies, songs, poetry, novels, short stories and painting that highlight the suffering of persons who are ill. One particular example is the emotional journey of Mr Henry Jayasena, the famous playwright who died of cancer of the large bowel. Another is Van Gogh's struggle with mental illness and distress. The students are exposed to this through a lecture and assignments.

Reflection

These include lectures on emotional intelligence and options to follow secular forms of mindfulness training. This is based on the knowledge that mindfulness (and meditation) enables one to become aware of one's emotions and be sensitive to the feelings of others.

Conclusions

In conclusion, once again my congratulations on your academic achievements. In this address I have attempted to highlight the importance of 'compassion' and describe its relevance to professionals. I have shown you that as you advance in your professional career, you run the risk of losing your compassion. However, there is hope, and I have described a few steps we could all take as individuals to enhance compassion in our respective professional life. I have also described how to enhance compassion through the arts, narratives and mindfulness, which may be useful for those developing curricula in the Open University.

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Professor Saroj Jayasinghe

Email: sarojoffice@yahoo.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1460-6073>