

Tech's Role in Empathy-based Medicine



According to Dr Jeremy Howick and Dr Sian Rees of the Oxford Empathy Programme, existing digital technologies need to be exploited to enable a paradigm shift in current healthcare delivery that focuses on tests, treatments and targets as opposed to the therapeutic benefits of empathy. The article is published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine.

The authors believe that a new paradigm of empathy-based medicine is essential for improving patient outcomes, reducing practitioner burnout and saving money.

They also write that empathy-based medicine could reestablish relationship as the heart of healthcare. Practitioners are less likely to focus on this due to several factors including time pressure, conflicting priorities and bureaucracy. But by re-establishing the clinical encounter as the heart of healthcare by exploiting available technologies, this can be rectified.

Digital technology is already being used to reduce paperwork and gathering patient information prior to consultation through email or mobile devices in the waiting room. But this can be further utilised during consultation as well by placing the computer screen in a position that allows both the patient and the doctor to see it. This can be quite useful when discussing treatment options and showing infographics and can play a role in chalking out a treatment plan that is mutually agreed upon. This can also facilitate and improve decision-making.

Dr Howick said: "The spread of alternatives to face-to-face consultations is still in its infancy, as is our understanding of when a machine will do and when a person-to-person relationship is needed." He does warn that technology can also sometimes get in the way of communication. "Patients and carers need to be involved in determining the need for, and designing, new technologies", he said.

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