

Developing a holistic healthcare practitioner

The present healthcare environment requires practitioners who are not only technically proficient but also compassionate, empathetic, and fully committed to a patient-centred approach. These professionals can be best described as “holistic practitioners,” given their emphasis on supporting the complete well-being of patients, as well as addressing patients’ physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Our editorial explores strategies for nurturing such practitioners who focus on the person as a whole, rather than merely treating individual diseases.

Building Competence Through Integrated Knowledge and Skills

Competence in healthcare now requires more than a strong grounding in biomedical and clinical sciences. It requires blending knowledge and skills across various disciplines with a focus on a patient-centred approach. This holistic approach involves embracing interprofessional education, which allows students to learn alongside other healthcare roles, while fostering the teamwork essential for comprehensive care (Samarasekera et al., 2024).

Cultivating Empathy and Compassion

Empathy and compassion are key qualities that distinguish a healthcare provider as a genuine healer. Developing empathy involves understanding the patient’s perspective and their unique experiences. Techniques like role-playing, patient storytelling, and reflective exercises can help practitioners view health issues from the patient’s viewpoint. This approach nurtures true empathy that goes beyond simply recognising a patient’s emotions to fostering authentic concern. A medical education culture that values compassion as much as the technical skill underlying clinical practice creates and cultivates practitioners who truly care about the person behind the diagnosis (Samarasekera et al., 2022).

Promoting Efficient, Patient-Centred Care

While efficiency in healthcare is crucial, it must not overshadow patient attentiveness. Holistic practice prioritises streamlining processes to enhance outcomes without compromising empathy or care quality. Training in time management, communication, and systems-based approaches can help practitioners balance effectiveness with patient-centredness. This approach is aptly described by Groopman (2007), who highlights the need for practitioners to deeply listen to the patient narrative. The requirement for attentive listening can be augmented using digital tools, such as electronic health records and telemedicine, which can improve efficiency while supporting personalised care. Furthermore, emerging technologies like AI and wearable health devices offer proactive insights for practitioners, enhancing preventive care and lightening practitioner workload. In telemedicine, training in empathetic communication ensures patients feel genuinely heard, even during virtual appointments.

Recognising cultural diversity is essential in delivering patient-centred care. Cultural competency training helps practitioners respect and understand diverse healthcare beliefs and practices (Vella et al., 2022). Providing the groundwork for holistic patient interaction will likely require medical education to embrace role-play and simulations with diverse patient scenarios, which leads to preparing practitioners to meet the unique needs of various communities and facilitate more inclusive care.

The Role of Self-Care and Well-being in Clinical Practice

The phrase “Physician, heal thyself” highlights the importance of self-care for healthcare practitioners, emphasising the importance of professionals themselves initiating, promoting and cultivating personal health and wellbeing (Mills et al.,

2018). Maintaining strong physical, mental, and emotional health enables practitioners to provide the highest quality of care. Self-care directly impacts patient care by building resilience, empathy, and sound decision-making, especially under pressure. Accentuating self-care among clinicians fosters a sustainable healthcare environment, preparing practitioners to meet the challenges of their roles more effectively and to minimise the occurrence of burnout, moral distress, and compassion fatigue (Sanchez-Reilly et al., 2013).

Resilience, often described as “grit”, is vital in healthcare, where professionals face high-stakes and emotionally taxing situations (Samarasekera & Gwee, 2020). This trait supports practitioners in maintaining focus and motivation, even under prolonged stress. When practitioners engage in holistic practices, such as prioritising their own well-being through regular exercise, mindfulness, and ensuring quality sleep, they can bolster resilience and adapt better to challenges, avoiding burnout (Rich et al., 2020). Practitioners with strong self-care habits not only enhance their own lives but also improve their ability to connect with patients meaningfully.

It is likely that holistic practitioners are better able to communicate, display empathy, and build trust with patients (Mills et al., 2018). They also maintain better focus and emotional balance, which are critical for accurate diagnoses and effective clinical decisions. Practitioners experiencing stress or burnout risk adversely impacting care quality, potentially leading to increased errors and reduced patient satisfaction (Sanchez-Reilly et al., 2013).

By modelling healthy behaviours, clinicians set an example for patients, subtly encouraging positive lifestyle choices. When practitioners view their own wellness as integral to patient care, they embody a holistic approach that values both practitioner and patient well-being. Promoting self-care within the curriculum is also essential. Institutions can support this by embedding wellness programmes, resilience training, and mindfulness practices, helping students value their own well-being. Mentorship programmes with experienced clinicians provide support, fostering a model of work-life balance, resilience, and self-care.

Addressing Holistic Skills Gaps

One major challenge in holistic training is the intensive academic and clinical workload, which often overshadows the human aspects of care (Mills et al., 2018). Medical education tends to focus heavily on medical knowledge, diagnostic and procedural skills, at times de-emphasising empathy, communication, and emotional intelligence. This can inadvertently lead practitioners to prioritise efficiency over patient connection. Furthermore, the rigorous demands of medical training may lead to a culture where self-care is undervalued, affecting practitioners’ overall well-being.

Another obstacle is the limited opportunity for interprofessional learning. Holistic care relies on collaboration across healthcare roles, yet many training programmes work in isolation, reducing exposure to real-world teamwork. This will likely limit understanding the interconnected nature of healthcare roles, making it difficult to deliver fully integrated care.

Healthcare practitioners practising holistic care may face ethical challenges, such as maintaining boundaries while showing empathy. Dedicated ethics training, with case studies on boundary management and unbiased care, can prepare practitioners to meet these challenges. Ethical frameworks, like the “Four Principles” of medical ethics namely autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice—serve as valuable guidelines for balanced, patient-centred decision-making. Interprofessional education should be prioritised, allowing students to work alongside those from other healthcare disciplines and develop respect for each role’s contributions. Such collaboration enhances communication skills and prepares practitioners to deliver comprehensive, patient-centred care.

Conclusion

Creating a healthcare workforce that is competent, compassionate, and efficient begins with focusing on the practitioners themselves. By embracing self-care, healthcare providers build the resilience and empathy needed to face the demands of clinical practice while improving patient outcomes. Holistic practitioners not only treat patients but embody wellness, showing compassion, commitment, and integrity. Emphasising practitioner well-being as essential to holistic care strengthens the healthcare system, fostering a culture of respect, trust, and shared commitment to patient-centred health.

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