

Title: Teaching empathy: Photos as narrative tools in clinical care for brain injury patients

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Abstract: Brain injury patients frequently face a lack of empathy in clinical settings that leads to feelings of being disrespected and powerless. Health-care providers may focus on their empirical knowledge of brain injury and may lack the capacity to recognize what their brain injured patients are going through. Brain injury patients may have communication challenges in turn. How break this communication and empathy impasse? This paper explores the use of photo-elicitation, in which patients take photographs of their experience and share them with clinicians, as one way to generate empathy in clinical relationships with acquired brain injury survivors and help patients and providers to teach each other about the injury, its impacts, and potential paths to healing. Broadly defined, empathy is the ability to understand another’s perspective or see through their eyes. Patient-generated photographs of living with brain injury thus become teaching tools in the clinical encounter as they assist in the sharing of expertise and perspective and foster mutually-comprehended understandings. The photos contain narrative elements (characters, plot, and context) and become prompts for stories that reveal suffering, strength, and clinical options – stories that might remain hidden without visual prompts. Photos of real lives can help patients and clinicians to be more emotionally engaged in the clinical conversation; the symbolic nature of the photos is important as they become symbols for patient experience, including emotional experience. As symbols photos can help to address, inform, and guide patient experience and clinical knowledge, bridge the gap between them, and create discursive spaces where evidence can be shared and empathy developed. Practicing empathy using photos may help clinicians to learn not just about patients but with them. Providing examples from research using photo-elicitation with brain injury patients this paper explores application of participatory visual methods to mutual teaching and learning in clinical care.