Beyond analgesia, amnesia and relaxation – compassion as the 4th component of anaesthesia?

Dr Robin Youngson, Anaesthetic Specialist
CoFounder of Hearts in Healthcare
Anaesthesia = amnesia + analgesia + relaxation AND compassion

Our materialistic science is misleading – each of our patients is an amazingly dynamic mind-body whole being
Anaesthesia = amnesia + analgesia + relaxation AND compassion

One episode of exercise changes gene expression.

3 hours of exercise per week for three months changed expression in 5,000 genes

Lindhold ME. Epigenetics. 2014 Dec;9(12):1557-69
Nine weeks of mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) altered expression of 1,059 genes in a trial of patients with inflammatory bowel disease

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Pessimists

The profound influence of psychological wellbeing

Long-term survival after heart attack:
- pessimists have 4 times higher death rate from cardiac disease and 3 times higher mortality from all causes of death

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The profound influence of psychological wellbeing

Chances of getting clinical influenza after standard inoculation:

- 3 times as many pessimists get influenza, as optimists

Burnout causes a 40% increased in heart attack and stroke – a bigger risk than smoking, high cholesterol or lack of exercise

Psychotherapy changes gene expression

In patients who responded to psychotherapy for Borderline Personality Disorder, improvement was associated with up-regulation of the gene for brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF).

Our life experiences, beliefs and stories dynamically change our gene expression, powerfully altering health outcomes.

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Medical treatment = drug effect + placebo effect

Placebo effect size is equal to drug effect size.

The ‘placebo’ response is not due to inert placebo – it’s a healing response

Moerman D.
Doctors can ‘fix’ bones with screws and plates and anastomose bowel with sutures. But the fusion of the bone and the reintegration of the bowel are miracles of healing.
The **experience** of care triggers a powerful biological response in the patient...

...and emotional memories of care last a lifetime

Photo credit: Gus Chan
Diabetic patients of high empathy primary care physicians had 42% fewer hospital admissions for metabolic crisis than patients of low-empathy physicians.

Compassionate, whole-person care in terminal lung cancer – early access to palliative care

- Fewer patients have depression, 16% vs 38%
- Fewer patients chose aggressive end of life care, 33% vs 54%
- Reduced overall cost of care
- But increased median survival, 11.6 months vs 8.9 months!

Randomised trial of compassionate care for homeless patients presenting to ER - 30% reduction in repeat visits in next month

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Physician-patient relationship has bigger effect size on 5-year risk of cardiovascular event than prescribing statins

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Supportive pre-op visit by anesthesiologist:
- Halved the dose of post-op opiates

Non-supportive pre-op visit by anesthesiologist:
- Length of stay 2.7 days longer

Harvard study 1964: Randomised trial of supportive / non-supportive manner in pre-op visit by anesthesiologist

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The science of interpersonal connection
Anaesthesia = amnesia + analgesia + relaxation AND compassion

Cascading reactions in the healing response…

- Wellness genes up-regulated
- New protein synthesis
- Tissue healing
- Enhanced immunity
- Lowered blood pressure
- Positive emotions

- Cancer genes activated
- Stress hormones
- Tissue breakdown
- Compromised immunity
- Raised blood pressure
- Negative emotions
Compassionate caring is more effective, safer, satisfies patients, saves time, reduces demand, gives meaning to work, and costs less.
But our medical science is objective, materialistic, reductionist… - we have become ‘body mechanics’, not compassionate healers
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Compassion is the calling that brought us into the healing professions – knowing suffering and wanting to do something about it.
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What does compassionate care look like?
Anaesthesia = amnesia + analgesia + relaxation AND compassion

Our anaesthesia care starts long before we enter the OR
Anaesthesia = amnesia + analgesia + relaxation
AND compassion

Want to learn more?
Anaesthesia = amnesia + analgesia + relaxation AND compassion

Who provides compassionate care and support to the patient in Resus?
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Is is time to formally include compassion as an essential component of anaesthesia?

In our text books?  
In our training?  
In our fellowship exams?  
In our CPD?  
In our public relations?
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{the movement for human-centred healthcare}

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