Towards a global definition of patient centred care

The patient should be the judge of patient centred care

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Additional article information

Key messages about patient centred care can be drawn from the paper by Little et al in this issue of the BMJ (p 468).^1^ Firstly, strong agreement exists between the definition of patient centredness that arises empirically from this observational study of patients in the United Kingdom and another definition arising from reflections on practice in South Africa and Canada,^2^ suggesting an international definition of patient centred medicine. Secondly, the premise of the observational study is correct—that the best way of measuring patient centredness is an assessment made by the patients themselves.

Patient centredness is becoming a widely used, but poorly understood, concept in medical practice. It may be most commonly understood for what it is not—technology centred, doctor centred, hospital centred, disease centred. Definitions of patient centred care seek to make the implicit in patient care explicit. Such definitions are, we recognise, oversimplifications which help in teaching and research but fail to capture the indivisible whole of a healing relationship. Perhaps qualitative research comes closer to conveying the qualities of such care.

Acknowledging these limitations, researchers seek answers to crucial questions about patient centred medicine. What is it? Do patients want it? Do doctors practise it? What are its benefits? Little et al focus on the first two questions.^1^ Their results indicate that the answer to the second question is a resounding “yes.” Patients want patient centred care which (a) explores the patients’ main reason for the visit, concerns, and need for information; (b) seeks an integrated understanding of the patients’ world—that is, their whole person, emotional needs, and life issues; (c) finds common ground on what the problem is and mutually agrees on management; (d) enhances prevention and health promotion; and (e) enhances the continuing relationship between the patient and the doctor. Here, then, is the beginning of a truly international definition, based on both British patients’ views and the reflections of clinicians from South Africa and Canada.^2^ Interestingly, a comparison of the observational study by Little et al^1^ with the conceptual framework put together by our group in 1995^2^ showed that the observational study strongly supports the conceptual framework. Specifically, 13 of 19 items created by Little et al grouped together as expected according to Stewart et al^2^ (see table on bmj.com).

Regarding the question whether doctors practise patient centred care, data indicate that doctors vary but on the whole provide most patients with partially patient centred care. Specifically, the average patient centred score on a scale of 0-100 is 50.7 (SD 17.9, range 8-93).^3^ Some doctors are very patient centred and show a wide range of scores,
indicating a flexible style. Many others are not very patient centred and show a narrow range of scores, indicating a fixed style. There is also evidence of tangible benefit: patient centred communication is positively associated with patient satisfaction, adherence, and better health outcomes.

A systematic search of Medline for the terms “patient centred (centered) approach” or “patient centredness (centeredness)” in 1995-2000 identified 65 papers. Four additional papers were identified through searching authors' names for the years 1995-2000, from a recent conference (international conference on health and communication for health professionals, educators and researchers, Barcelona, September 2000), and the reference list of Little et al. Of the 69 papers, 55% were research papers, 35% on theory, 7% on education, and 3% descriptions of programmes. Of the 38 research papers five were randomised intervention studies; six measured health outcomes; and 22 measured patient centredness (eight by direct observation, six by patient perception questionnaire, one by both direct observation and patient perception questionnaire, five by assessing physician or student experiences, and two through a patient centred intervention only). The 69 papers originated from the UK (21), the United States (19), Norway (5), Italy (5), Canada (5), South Africa (3), Australia (3), and Germany (2), with one each from Israel, Netherlands, Finland, Spain, Belgium, and one unknown. In the Cochrane consumers and communication group no review has been conducted on the patient centred approach.

Patient perceptions of patient centredness are important to study. The Medline search indicated that most educators and researchers focused solely on experts' ratings of observed behaviour in clinical encounters. However, in one study of both observation of the clinical encounter and patient perceptions the patients' perception of the patient centredness of the interaction was the stronger predictor not only of health outcomes but also of efficiency of health care (fewer diagnostic tests and fewer referrals). This can be described as the ultimate patient centred finding: the patients', not the experts', views on patient centredness predicted important outcomes.

Two common misunderstandings about patient centred medicine may be perpetuated by Little et al's study. Firstly, they and others they cite expressed concerns that patients “may not prefer a patient centred approach” and hence its universal adoption would be “unwise.” This concern rests on the misconception that being patient centred means sharing all information and all decisions. Being patient centred actually means taking into account the patient's desire for information and for sharing decision making and responding appropriately. Secondly, the basic question of Little et al's study (Do all patients in primary care want all components of patient centredness?) implies that patient centred care can be neatly separated into divisible parts. The patients' responses indicated, in contrast, that they uniformly valued all aspects of patient centredness. Further, although components are used for ease in teaching and research, patient centred clinical practice is a holistic concept in which components interact and unite in a unique way in each patient-doctor encounter.
An additional table appears on the BMJ's website

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See the article "Preferences of patients for patient centred approach to consultation in primary care: observational study"
This article has been cited by other articles in PMC.

**References**

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