

Monika Leończyk-Spórna¹, Aleksandra Jażdżyńska²

Is empathy still important in today's world?

Czy empatia jest nadal istotna w dzisiejszym świecie?

¹ Department of Dermatology, Provincial Integrated Hospital in Elbląg, Elbląg, Poland

² 5th Military Teaching Hospital with Polyclinic of Independent Public Health Care Unit, Kraków, Poland

Correspondence: Monika Leończyk-Spórna, Department of Dermatology, Provincial Integrated Hospital in Elbląg, Królewiecka 146, 82-300 Elbląg, Poland, e-mail: Lek.mleonczyksporna@gmail.com

¹ Oddział Dermatologiczny, Wojewódzki Szpital Zespolony w Elblągu, Polska

² 5 Wojskowy Szpital Kliniczny z Polikliniką SPZOZ, Kraków, Polska

Adres do korespondencji: Monika Leończyk-Spórna, Oddział Dermatologiczny, Wojewódzki Szpital Zespolony w Elblągu, ul. Królewiecka 146, 82-300 Elbląg, e-mail: Lek.mleonczyksporna@gmail.com

ORCID iDs

1. Monika Leończyk-Spórna <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4858-8846>

2. Aleksandra Jażdżyńska <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8365-5915>

In our paper, we attempted to answer the question whether empathy is still important in today's world. From the psychological point of view, two types of empathy can be distinguished, i.e. emotional empathy defined as the ability to sense other people's mental states, and cognitive empathy, described as the ability to adopt the way of thinking of other people. Empathy is a very desirable feature among medical professionals, hence students are taught an empathetic approach to patients already from the early years of medical studies. Much is said about the positive impact of such behaviour on the cooperation between the doctor and the patient, as well as on the final treatment outcomes. We would like to draw attention to the role of empathy in the doctor-patient relationship and show how it affects professional burnout among healthcare workers (Bukowski et al., 2022; Decety, 2020; Esagian et al., 2019). The empathetic approach is especially important for patients with chronic conditions such as asthma. In China, a study was conducted to evaluate the impact of the level of empathy measured by a physician (using the Jefferson Scale of Empathy) on the physical and mental health of asthmatic patients. Patients were assessed for anxiety, self-reliance, sleep efficiency and levels of interleukin-6, an inflammatory marker at baseline and after 3 months. It was found that patients in the group treated by physicians with higher levels of empathy had significantly lower anxiety and interleukin-6 levels, as well as higher levels of independence and better sleep efficiency than the other patients (Wu et al., 2020).

Intimate illnesses are also conditions requiring an empathic approach. One of the studies addressing this issue was conducted among HIV-infected patients in the US. The participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the contact

with the doctor who regularly followed them up for six months. The study found that patients' satisfaction levels were higher if they considered their doctor to be empathetic and knowledgeable. The authors of the study also suggested that the doctor's interpersonal and communication skills have a greater impact on patient satisfaction with the treatment process than technical skills (Sullivan et al., 2000).

Women's visits to the gynaecologist's office is another noteworthy topic. As in the previous case, here too the situation concerns particularly sensitive issues. The patient should feel that she is an equal partner in the patient-doctor interaction, which will allow for controlling the embarrassment during both gynaecological examination and discussing difficult topics. In one of articles, 126 women enrolled for the study to complete a questionnaire on the quality of gynaecological examination and the relationship between the doctor and the patients (Gruszka et al., 2014). The questions concerned communication skills, attentive listening and conveying important information. Unfortunately, up to 41% of respondents reported the fact that they did not have time to share all their health concerns with the doctor, and over 50% claimed that the doctor did not ask them thoroughly about their health problems. We know that nowadays a growing number of patients are willing to participate in the treatment process. Patients increasingly expect partnership and subjective treatment from doctors, taking into account emotional aspects related to health and disease. The issue of proper, empathic treatment of patients is of particular importance in the practice of a gynaecologist. It helps break the barrier when exploring and discussing intimate topics of human life, which is important in the diagnostic and therapeutic process (Synowiec-Piłat, 2003; Tymińska et al., 2018).

Another important topic is the relationship between empathy and burnout among healthcare professionals. The term “occupational burnout” was introduced for the first time in 1974 by an American psychiatrist Herbert J. Freudenberger. The author defined burnout as a state of fatigue or frustration resulting from dedication to a cause, relationship or way of life, and disappointment with something that did not bring the reward expected by the individual (Janczewska and Sierdziński, 2014). As we know, the work of a doctor or nurse is not only a source of great satisfaction and contentment, but it can also be frustrating, as well as mentally and emotionally taxing. A total of 260 employees with known professional profile were enrolled in one study (Bridgeman et al., 2018). The study showed that both doctors and nurses were characterised by an average level of empathy and professional burnout, but these results differed depending on the specialisation performed. Non-surgical physicians showed a higher level of empathy and lower burnout than surgical specialists. It is also worth emphasising the highest level of empathy according to the Mehrabian and Epstein Empathy Scale was achieved by primary care nurses, which significantly exceeded the results of treatment nurses. The study also showed some protective effect of empathy against burnout. Empirical research on empathy confirms the belief that it has a significant impact on the established relationships, perceived satisfaction and professional fulfilment (Kliś and Kossewska, 1997; Wilczek-Rużyczka, 2006). The ability to empathise with the emotional states of another person helps understand their decisions, attitudes and actions, which allows for establishing a valuable relationship with them. Research has shown that patients, when evaluating doctors, pay more attention to their interpersonal and communication skills than their substantive expertise in the field of medicine. Such a general impression shapes patient’s attitude not only to the doctors themselves, but also to their recommendations. Therefore, patients treated with greater empathy are more willing to cooperate with a given healthcare professional, trust his or her opinions, and thereby show higher levels of compliance. Moreover, it turns out that empathy can have beneficial effects not only for patients and their treatment process, but also for medical workers and their job satisfaction. According to research, a high level of empathy can protect doctors and nurses from the burnout syndrome. These data clearly show how important empathy is in the medical profession and this is something we should bear in mind.

Conflict of interest

The authors do not declare any financial or personal links to other persons or organisations that could adversely affect the content of this publication or claim rights thereto.

References

- Bridgeman PJ, Bridgeman MB, Barone J: Burnout syndrome among healthcare professionals. *Am J Health Syst Pharm* 2018; 75: 147–152.
- Bukowski H, Sweeney C, Bennett D et al.: Medical student empathy and breaking bad news communication in a simulated consultation. *Patient Educ Couns* 2022; 105: 1342–1345.
- Decety J: Empathy in medicine: what it is, and how much we really need it. *Am J Med* 2020; 133: 561–566.
- Esagian G, Esagian-Pouftsis S, Kaprinis SG: [Empathy in psychiatry and psychotherapy]. *Psychiatriki* 2019; 30: 156–164.
- Gruszka J, Wrześniewska M, Adamczyk-Gruszka O: Wizyta u ginekologa – aspekt psychologiczny, diagnostyczny i leczniczy. *Med Og Nauk Zdr* 2014; 20: 126–130.
- Janczewska E, Sierdziński J: Ocena porównawcza najczęściej stosowanych metod i technik statystycznych w pracach naukowych dotyczących syndromu wypalenia zawodowego wśród pracowników ochrony zdrowia. *Hygeia Public Health* 2014; 49: 759–764.
- Kliś M, Kossewska J: Empatia emocjonalna i związane z nią cechy indywidualne. *Prace Psychologiczne* 1997; 180: 129–139.
- Sullivan LM, Stein MD, Savetsky JB et al.: The doctor-patient relationship and HIV-infected patients’ satisfaction with primary care physicians. *J Gen Intern Med* 2000; 15: 462–469.
- Synowiec-Piłat M: Percepcja umiejętności interpersonalnych (komunikacyjnych) lekarzy ginekologów. *Gin Prakt* 2003; 11: 19–24.
- Tymińska J, Tymiński R, Kunecka K et al.: [How to improve female patient’s satisfaction with gynecologic visit?]. *Gin Perinat Prakt* 2018; 3: 103–111.
- Wilczek-Rużyczka E: Empatia a wypalenie zawodowe u pracowników ochrony zdrowia. *Sztuka Leczenia* 2006; 13: 39–49.
- Wu H, Zhang Y, Li S et al.: Care is the doctor’s best prescription: the impact of doctor-patient empathy on the physical and mental health of asthmatic patients in China. *Psychol Res Behav Manag* 2020; 13: 141–150.