

# Primary care



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## Teaching as therapy: cross sectional and qualitative evaluation of patients' experiences of undergraduate psychiatry teaching in the community

Kate Walters, Marta Buszewicz, Jill Russell, Charlotte Humphrey

Department of Primary Care and Population Sciences, Royal Free and University College Medical School, London N19 5LW

Kate Walters  
*MRC special training fellow in health services research*

Marta Buszewicz  
*senior lecturer in primary care*

Jill Russell  
*lecturer in postgraduate education*

Florence  
Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery, King's College London, London SE1 8WA  
Charlotte Humphrey  
*professor of healthcare evaluation*

Correspondence to: K Walters  
[k.walters@peps.ucl.ac.uk](mailto:k.walters@peps.ucl.ac.uk)

BMJ 2003;326:740-3

### Abstract

**Objective** To explore the impact of participating in undergraduate teaching in general practice for patients with common mental disorders.

**Design** Questionnaire survey and qualitative in-depth interviews.

**Setting** Community based undergraduate teaching programme for fourth year students at a London medical school doing a psychiatry attachment.

**Participants** Questionnaire survey: all patients involved in the teaching programme over one academic year. In-depth interviews: 20 patients, 14 students, and 12 general practitioner tutors participating in the programme.

**Results** The questionnaire showed high levels of satisfaction with teaching encounters for participating patients, which were corroborated in the interviews. Many patients and general practitioners reported specific therapeutic benefits for patients from contact with students, including raised self esteem and empowerment; the development of a coherent "illness narrative"; new insights into their problems; and a deeper, more balanced, and understanding doctor-patient relationship. For a few patients the teaching caused some distress, which may relate to a lack of insight into their condition or deficits in students' interviewing skills.

**Conclusions** Participation in teaching can have additional positive therapeutic outcomes for selected patients with common mental disorders, although a small minority report negative effects. Testing in a larger sample is needed to determine the characteristics of patients in these two subgroups and establish whether these effects persist.

### Introduction

The impact on patients of participation in training medical students has been little explored.<sup>1</sup> Studies show that most patients, but not all, are highly satisfied with teaching encounters.<sup>2-10</sup> Beyond these general findings, little information is available about positive or negative effects on patients of participation in teaching. In this paper we report findings from a study exploring the impact of participation in teaching on patients with common mental disorders.

### Methods

We examined the experiences of patients, students, and tutors taking part in an innovative undergraduate teaching programme ("mental health in the community"), run since 1998 at the Royal Free and University College Medical School. The programme consists of four to five half-day sessions integrated in the fourth year psychiatry attachment. The programme uses systematic teaching in conjunction with real patients with common mental disorders; these patients are invited to meet individual students or pairs of students for a 60-90 minute interview. The patients have a range of mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety, somatisation, drug or alcohol dependence, eating disorders, psychosis, and dementia. The structure of the programme has been described in detail elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

### Study population and sample

In January and February 2001 we sent all 115 patients who had participated in the teaching programme in the preceding calendar year a semistructured anonymised questionnaire about their experiences of and attitudes towards the programme. From June 2001 to September 2002 we conducted in-depth interviews with 46 participants: 20 patients, 12 general practitioner tutors, and 14 students. We selected the patients for interview from respondents to the initial questionnaire according to their attitudes to teaching (positive and negative), age, and sex. We also took into account their ethnicity, social class, and type of mental health problem to ensure the widest possible diversity of participants and views. We selected the students for interview according to age, sex, prior experience of mental health, and ethnicity, and to reflect the range of general practices that the students were attached to in the training programme. Of the 13 general practitioner tutors taking part in the teaching programme, 12 agreed to be interviewed.

### Data collection

We developed the questionnaire and the topic guides for the interviews by consensus following a literature review and then piloted and amended them before use. The principal researcher (KW) conducted all interviews, which were audiotaped and transcribed. Interviews with patients took place a median of three (range 0.5-12) months after participation in the teach-

ing programme. Interviews with students and tutors took place within three months of their last involvement.

### Data analysis

The quantitative data were analysed descriptively using the software package SPSS, version 9.0. We analysed the interview transcripts thematically using a “framework” approach (for more details see the full version of this paper on [bmj.com](http://bmj.com)).<sup>12</sup>

## Results

### Patient questionnaire

The questionnaire response rate was 95/115 (83%). The mean age of respondents was 47.2 (range 20-90) years and 51/95 (54%) were women. Most (96%) respondents thought that teaching medical students at their general practice was a “good idea,” and most (91%) said that they would be happy to take part in similar teaching in the future. See full version of this paper on [bmj.com](http://bmj.com) for further details of patients’ views from the questionnaire.

### In-depth interviews

We discuss the interview findings under three headings: positive impact on patients, benefits to patient care, and negative impact—with corresponding illustrative quotes (boxes 1 and 2). Box 3 summarises the range of views expressed by each group of respondents.

#### *Positive impact on patients*

The potential therapeutic benefit of participating in the teaching was a central theme across interviews with tutors, patients, and to a lesser extent students. Five main elements of therapeutic benefit were identified: time to talk and being respectfully heard; increased self esteem, validation, and empowerment; development of a coherent narrative; new insights; and depth, balance, and understanding in the doctor-patient relationship.

*Time to talk, being respectfully heard*—This theme was noted by patients, tutors, and students. One tutor compared the teaching to reflective counselling, and others echoed this, noting that patients found it a release to talk at length to a friendly, interested, empathetic, and non-judgmental “neutral” person.

*Self esteem, validation, and empowerment*—This was a widely expressed benefit noted by patients, many general practitioners, and some students. Interviewees said that the general practitioner’s explicit recognition that the patient had something important to offer and a sense of “giving back” was validating and empowering, raised the patient’s self esteem, and contributed to a positive therapeutic relationship between doctor and patient.

*Development of a coherent narrative and new insights*—Many patients and some tutors and students believed that the opportunity to talk enabled patients to make sense of their experience and develop their “illness narrative.”<sup>13</sup> This was seen as beneficial, increasing understanding of their feelings and experiences.

*Depth, balance, and understanding*—For patients with a close pre-existing relationship with their doctor, participation in teaching often made little additional impact. For others, both patients and general practitioners reported a clear strengthening of the doctor-patient relationship. Key components identified

by both patients and doctors were a sense of a stronger bond, more even balance of power in the relationship, and more in-depth understanding.

#### *Beneficial effects on patient care*

Many tutors identified potential beneficial effects on patient care both for the individuals directly involved and more generally. This was not mentioned by or explored further with patients or students. Some tutors reported that they had started recruiting patients with common mental disorders into the teaching programme as part of these patients’ “therapeutic regime.”

### Box 1: Potential positive therapeutic elements

#### **Time to talk, being respectfully heard**

“I think probably they’re more likely to see medical students as maybe less judgmental and more on their side than fully qualified doctors, and I know that one patient, she’s been sexually abused but she’s never told anybody else that before.” (student 9)

#### **Self esteem, validation, and empowerment**

“In a way it was quite—not flattering, but it was—it was giving my situation some kind of credence or some kind of, you know, validity, that what I’d been through was, you know, it was worthy enough to go along and talk to students.” (patient 13; episode of acute psychosis and depression)

#### **Development of coherent narrative**

“It probably sort of vocalised my thoughts a bit—because I’ve suffered from it so long, its like the norm to me—I was thinking gosh, they must think this is really, you know, quite bad really. I was seeing it in a fresh way, if you know what I mean, by them asking me questions.” (patient 3; agoraphobia)

#### **New insights**

“It was useful to relive the experience, as this reminded me that it was really me that it happened to and it could happen again—going through it with the students reminded me to be careful to not let it happen again and to recognise the signs of when it might be coming on.” (patient 16; eating disorder)

#### **Depth, balance, and understanding in doctor-patient relationship**

“It definitely builds a bond. Absolutely. And they’ve done you a favour, so I feel that the power is slightly over the other way ... so rather than them being inherently grateful all the time, as some of them are, it sort of changes everything and makes it feel more of an equal relationship.” (general practitioner 8)

### Box 2: Negative impact

“Maybe some of the questions were apt to churn up all the past, and when that happens the emotions tend to start ticking over as well ... [later in interview] She was harping on about why don’t you think you can work ... because she couldn’t understand ... I found with the other students they were more apt for listening.” (patient 2: depression)

“Some find it very stressful and they need about 10 minutes of debriefing after the session. Most of the patients—and this is what I have learnt with time—that need debriefing [are] the ones that have not come to terms with their problem. And when their whole life history is sort of laid out in an hour—they find it quite traumatic.” (general practitioner 11)

**Box 3: Range of views expressed by patients, general practitioner tutors, and students about positive and negative impact of teaching on patients**

**Patients' views**

*Positive impact*

- Most patients valued time to talk to empathetic students without fear of burdening
- Sense of reward and raised self esteem from "giving back," helping others, a sense of purpose, reinforcing positive self image, and validating their experiences
- Taught them how to talk about their problems, vocalising and clarifying their thoughts
- Many patients thought that students helped provide new insights by asking thought provoking questions, enabling new revelations, or by allowing patients to tell their story. This helped patients to understand how their problems evolved and progressed (or lessened), and it helped to increase their self awareness and see things in a "fresh" way
- Many patients reported a strong pre-existing relationship with their general practitioner and little additional impact from the teaching; others said it increased depth, balance, and understanding in the relationship

*Negative impact*

- Most patients reported no negative effects
- Some were nervous before meeting students and initially in interviews, but this dissipated during the interview
- A few were anxious whether they had said the "right" things to the students
- Two found it an emotional upheaval and "draining" to relive their experiences
- One said it could be potentially intrusive to some (but not to herself)
- Another said it might encourage some to worry about their ailments (but not himself)

**GP tutors' views**

*Positive impact*

- Tutors widely believed that patients enjoyed the teaching—with benefits for patients' self esteem in "giving back"—and saw it as a validating and empowering experience
- Many noted benefits for the patient in having extra time to talk to empathetic students
- Most said that it improved the doctor-patient relationship, as a result of increased knowledge, more balance, and explicit interest on the part of the doctor
- Some said it allowed patients to develop a coherent narrative, enabling them to put their illness in context or deal with traumatic events
- Most believed that patient care benefited through more thorough knowledge and deeper understanding
- Some said that students gave new insights on patients
- Some tutors integrated teaching into part of their therapeutic regime for selected patients
- A few said that teaching encouraged them to keep up to date in that area, with indirect potential benefits for patients

*Negative impact*

- Most GPs reported no adverse effects on patients
- A few said that occasionally patients were distressed and needed debriefing but had no apparent lasting consequences
- Some of the distressed patients had reported overall beneficial effects
- A few general practitioners said that teaching made it more difficult to maintain boundaries, encouraging an uncomfortable sense of obligation towards patients

**Students' views**

*Positive impact*

- Most students reported that patients seemed to enjoy talking to them
- Some said that students may be easier to talk to as they are less "judgmental"
- "Giving back" raised patients' self esteem, validated their problem, and gave them a focus
- Taking part in teaching makes patients feel "not alone" and normalises their illness experience
- Students reported beneficial effects for patients from an opportunity to reflect "how far had they had come," resulting sometimes in new revelations
- A few students said that patients were clearly there for teaching not "therapy," and it would not change how a patient felt about things

*Negative impact*

- Students reported no negative experiences relating to contact with patients
- After probing by the interviewer, a few students said that it could potentially be distressing or intrusive for some patients but not with those they had seen

They were also using it as a way of getting to know new patients better and deliberately choosing patients in whom they thought a more fully documented history would be beneficial. See [bmj.com](http://bmj.com) for illustrative quotes from participants.

*Negative impact on patients*

Most patients reported no negative effects. Two reported that the student interview was distressing and an "emotional upheaval," although the overall experience was beneficial. Some tutors reported that a few patients occasionally became distressed, although tutors viewed these episodes as transient and said they were alleviated by debriefing. A few tutors reported that their boundaries with patients participating in teaching were more blurred and that they had an uncomfortable sense of increased obligation towards them.

**Discussion**

The responses to the questionnaire survey showed that patients with common mental disorders in the

community generally respond positively to participation in teaching. This is consistent with previous studies in other patient groups.<sup>2-8</sup> The interviews corroborated this generally positive outcome to a degree which neither we nor the tutors had expected. The questionnaire survey found that a small proportion of patients expressed negative views about the teaching, which was confirmed by the interview findings, suggesting that participation in teaching can be distressing for a small minority.

In the limited previous work in this field, patients (predominantly with physical not mental health problems) in two studies found satisfaction from helping others, receiving a more thorough "check up," and talking to someone not involved with their care—but specific therapeutic gains were not explored.<sup>14 15</sup> In previous studies with other subjects, general practitioners have reported benefits to patient care as a result of teaching, but again specific therapeutic effects from teaching and its integration with clinical care were not described.<sup>16</sup>

### What is already known on this topic

Patients show high levels of general satisfaction with their participation in teaching

Little is known in detail about outcomes for patients who participate in teaching—in particular, patients with common mental disorders in community settings

### What this study adds

Patients with common mental disorders respond well to participation in undergraduate teaching in primary care

Most patients value time to talk and reflect, and some gained a stronger, more balanced doctor-patient relationship

In some patients the process results in higher self esteem and empowerment, a more coherent “illness narrative,” and new insights

A few patients find the teaching encounter distressing

### Methodological considerations

The patients in this study were a highly selected group who had been chosen to participate in the teaching by their general practitioner and had responded to the initial questionnaire survey. The results cannot therefore be generalised to all patients with common mental disorders. Our sample is, however, likely to be reasonably representative of those who participated in the teaching programme.

The researcher who conducted the interviews was connected with administering the teaching programme but had no involvement in developing the programme or direct involvement with participating patients or students. We were aware of this causing potential bias towards a positive outcome for the evaluation and made special efforts to compensate by use of probing questions for negative aspects in the interviews and by independent corroboration by other team members at all stages of analysis.

### Meaning and implications

In this study patients with common mental disorders taking part in undergraduate teaching in community settings were positive about the experience, and in some cases specific therapeutic gains were directly attributed to participation in the teaching. For a few patients, participation in teaching seemed to cause some distress. Doctors considering clinical teaching with patients with common mental disorders can be generally encouraged by these findings.

Further work should use a larger sample, identify characteristics of patients who may find participation in teaching distressing and of those who may benefit most, and establish whether these effects persist.

We thank Peter Raven, Gill Livingston, Joe Rosenthal, Paul Wallace and Alan Selwyn for their help in developing the teaching programme and this evaluation, and all the general practitioner tutors, participating patients, and students for their participation in and commitment to the community teaching.

Contributors: See bmj.com

Funding: No special funding.

Competing interests: MB had helped in the development and administration of the teaching programme that was being evaluated and KW helped in the administration of it, but neither was involved in its delivery.

Ethical approval: Ethical consent was obtained from local research ethics committees.

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### Endpiece

#### A tribute

It is hard not to love Kevin; it is equally hard to know which Kevin you are loving. He is that complicated creature once called a “medicine man,” a term that presents us with a host of dualities: pillar of society/leprechaun; medieval alchemist/medical master; shaman/clinician; witchdoctor/psychologist; juggler/saint. I have observed him in all three phases, I think; I have appeared at his office in despair, begging for some magic pill, only to leave like Fred Astaire, lighter than air, with not even a placebo to con me on my way. How does this happen? What went on in there during that hour or more, aside from a cardiogram, some palpation, and what I think of as the *Stethoscopic Follies*, the shortest show in New York. Oh yes, the prerequisite blood sample; but all that surely didn't take an hour plus. Of course not; we *talked*.

Bernstein L.

A view of the author: the medicine man.

In: Cahill K. *A bridge to peace*.

New York: Haymarket Doyma, 1988:98

Eoin O'Brien, professor of cardiovascular pharmacology, Dublin