The power of storytelling

A year ago I wrote an editorial entitled, “The power of the narrative” (CONJ, Vol. 29, No. 1). I was inspired then by the digital stories that had been developed by the Canadian Cancer Society (CCS). These were stories told by cancer survivors about their experiences being diagnosed, treated, and living afterward. We saw the digital stories for the first time at the CANO/ACIO Annual Conference in Prince Edward Island.

I am inspired to write again about the power of storytelling by seeing a second round of digital stories from the Canadian Cancer Society. We saw them projected at the recent CANO/ACIO Annual Conference in Winnipeg. Over the past year, the CCS has continued its efforts to bring patient and family voices forward to share stories about their experiences with cancer. This time, CCS drew in a diversity of voices from individuals living in the North, living rurally, and living with limited resources. The stories brought into stark reality the issues of coping with cancer together with the challenges of living away from urban centres. I encourage you to go to the CCS web-site and view these new stories.

I wanted to bring the topic of storytelling back in front of you to remind you how powerful stories can be. When the right stories are told at the right time, they can have such an impact.

Stories help us connect with others and understand a little bit more about their experiences. Stories give us a window—a glimpse—into their worlds. They help us see with new eyes, perhaps even seeing the world in a different way. Stories are the entry point to understanding a different experience and have the potential to change our perspective.

As human beings, we have been using stories for thousands of years to hand down learnings and knowledge. Stories engage our curiosity, our emotions, our imagination. They are not just for the times we are gathered around a campfire or just before the lights go out at bedtime; they are part of our daily lives. They are within the anecdotes we tell our friends and family, the conversations we have, the books we read, and the films and videos we watch. And they have the power to transform.

Stories help us create culture and values. They help us see who we are and what is important to us. They can bring a group together around a single thing and mobilize energy for change. The right story at the right time has the power to motivate.

Sharing patient or staff stories at staff and committee meetings can help focus discussions, bring situations to light, communicate lessons, and illustrate improvements or problems in patient care. Sometimes we need to look beyond our graphs and numbers to truly engage our hearts and our minds and respond to the emotions in a story. Remembering the details in a story helps us absorb the message and its meaning.

Everyone has a story to tell. If we want to provide real value to our patients, we will listen to their stories. When we do, we will quickly discover that they care more about being treated with dignity and respect than about mortality rates, healthcare reform or policy. Patient stories acknowledge the patient’s own expertise—his or her life and experience with an illness. Listening to their stories will help us see patients as the unique individuals they are. In the words of one individual, “You don’t know me until I tell you my story.”

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