

Emotionally Evocative Patients Influence Physician Emotion, Engagement, and Judgements: Experimental Evidence

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Abstract: Patient safety experts warn that biases may emerge when physicians treat emotionally evocative patients. Such biases may adversely impact physician evaluations and expectations and reduce quality of care. We tested the hypotheses that irritable patient behaviors and patients with psychiatric comorbidities influence physician emotions, engagement, and clinical judgments. We designed four clinical cases using multimedia computer-simulated encounters with standardized patients. We created four versions of each in which we varied whether a patient with a physical complaint (1) behaved irritably or did not (control) and (2) had a psychiatric comorbidity or did not (control). All other case material was identical. Emergency physicians (n=81) assessed one patient from each of the four case combinations in an online experiment. Our main outcomes for each case are self-reported emotions, physician engagement, perceptions of patient-provided history, and likelihood the patient would adhere to treatment, recover, and return to work. We found that physicians reported significantly greater anger/frustration and less empathy in response to irritable patients. Physicians also reported less engagement with irritable patients, judged them to be poorer historians, and had lower expectations that they would adhere to treatment, recover, and return to work. No consistent effects emerged from the psychiatric illness manipulation. By demonstrating that that patient behaviors can evoke negative emotions in physicians, alter physicians' perceptions of patients, and reduce their engagement and expectations for positive outcomes, these findings suggest that interventions are urgently needed to combat biases that may lead to negative outcomes for patients.