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### Empathy – Does it contribute to positive patient outcomes?

Recently I was part of a conversation among physicians in which the question was asked; **“Is there any evidence that an emotional connection with a patient can affect clinical outcomes?”** The discussion was lively and meaningful; several physicians reported their beliefs that compassion and empathy expressed by doctors is an important part of a physician’s work. But hunches and anecdotal evidence aside, the question remains; is there scientific evidence that the physician-patient emotional connection can influence outcome?

As a matter of fact there is. In the March 2011 issue of *Academic Medicine*, researchers reported the results of just such a study involving 29 physicians who provided care to 891 diabetic patients through the Department of Family and Community Medicine at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia.

Participating physicians completed the Jefferson Scale of Empathy and were grouped into high, moderate, and low empathy scorers. Patient outcomes, as measured by the results of the most recent hemoglobin A1c (good control and poor control) and LDL-C tests (good control and poor control), were harvested from patients’ electronic records.

Jefferson Scale of Empathy  
**Physician empathy** is defined as the  
“cognitive attribute that involves an  
understanding of the patient’s experiences,  
concerns, and perspectives combined with a  
capacity to communicate this understanding  
and an intention to help.”

Patient clinical data were correlated with physician empathy scores (after controlling for physicians’ and patients’ gender, age, and patients’ health insurance).

#### Results

*Patients of physicians with high empathy scores were significantly more likely to have good control of hemoglobin A1c (56%) than were patients of physicians with low empathy scores (40%,  $P < .001$ ). Similarly, the proportion of patients with good LDL-C control was significantly higher for physicians with high empathy scores (59%) than physicians with low scores (44%,  $P < .001$ ).<sup>1</sup>*

The researchers concluded by stating; *“physician’s empathy is an important factor associated with clinical competence and patient outcomes.”<sup>2</sup>* Other studies have suggested that empathic interactions with patients such as physician-patient communication, positive verbal interaction, non-verbal cues (e.g., appropriate touch, eye contact, bodily posture, gestures), as well as length of the encounter can lead to increased patient satisfaction and better compliance (sources upon request).

This data seems to raise some important self-reflections...

- *How do you communicate empathy?*
- *What feedback do you receive about how you express empathy?*
- *What nourishes and encourages your capacity for empathy?*
- *Are there internal or external barriers that reduce your ability to be empathic?*

Thanks for reflecting.

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<sup>1</sup> Hojat, M, Louis, D, Markhan, FW, et.al. Physician’s empathy and clinical outcomes for diabetic patients. *Acad Med.* 2011;86:359-364.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid