

Do your patients trust you?: a sociological understanding of the implications of patient mistrust in healthcare professionals

Comment:

This paper can make a valuable contribution to conceptualizing issues related to medical diagnosis and care in Australia. The sociology of trust is not a subject considered often enough in the medical literature and the authors make clear that issues of trust are fundamental to delivery of health care. The authors raise the question of whether public trust is eroded through celebrity late or misdiagnosis and also raise the specter of the adverse impact of highly publicised infamous cases of medical impropriety and misconduct.

Meyer and Ward have summarised the characteristics of the physician that encourage patient trust: competence, benevolence, integrity, respect, and honesty. In the midst of busy practice demands, doctors would do well to reflect upon the extent to which their interactions with patients allows patients to be comfortable that all of these components needed for trust are met and that they are engaged in treating the whole person and not just a particular medical condition. The authors have provided some useful guidance for health professionals in what lies within their control to develop and sustain trust from patients.

However, a number of social factors (socioeconomic status, age, class, gender, education) play into an individual's decision to trust. This point is particularly relevant to vulnerable and marginalised minorities, particularly those who are seen as not fully participating in treatment or are often considered as non-compliant. A good example would be Aboriginal people where the outcomes from cancer diagnosis are markedly worse and treatment occurs in a socio-historical context coloured by disempowerment and poor cultural competence in mainstream service care. Doctors and mainstream providers need to work harder to achieve equivalent outcomes when there is a legacy of distrust that continues and is not directly under the control of either the patient or the doctor. Challenges remain for health care providers to develop a truly therapeutic and healing relationship in these circumstances, but it can be done.

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Reviewer.