Proxy Versus Real-Time Patient Engagement

None of the eight patient engagement articles in the February 2013 issue examine actual patient engagement—that is, real-time interactions between providers and patients. Like the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute, the authors conduct "as if" exercises or research efforts that attempt to identify the attributes of quality care via the production of decision aids, for example.

The authors assume that decision aids are meaning-independent knowledge commodities that can simply be transferred to the care setting. The authors’ focus is on a proxy, and the reader is left to conclude that all patients understand a decision aid in the identical way.

It would have been useful, for example, to know more about how the health coaches discussed by David Veroff and coauthors actually interacted with patients. And in the study described by Jaime King and Benjamin Moulton, everyone but the patients was surveyed about patient satisfaction. The relational aspect of health care delivery, the main key to improvement, was ignored.

There are three other related problems. First, the articles by Deborah Roseman and coauthors, Grace Lin and coauthors, Robert Nease and coauthors, and Elizabeth Bernabeo and Eric Holmboe suggest that engagement is optional. But since patients are always interpreting their own health status, they’re always engaged. Similarly, providers cannot step out of the process of interacting with the patient; they too are engaged.

Second, the articles by Judith Hibbard and coauthors and Delos Cosgrove and coauthors question whether engagement is cost-effective. Again, engagement is unavoidable, so this question is moot.

Third, what is suggested when engagement is considered optional, or when having a fully self-aware patient is thought not to be profitable or valuable? Didn’t Paulo Freire argue that any situation in which one impedes someone else from engaging in an inquiry or alienates someone else from his or her own decision making constitutes violence by changing people into objects?

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