



Review Article

**COMPASSIONATE HEALTHCARE DURING RECENT TIMES: A LOOK AT
THE GENERAL PERSPECTIVE AND HEAD AND NECK CANCER
PERSPECTIVE**

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Abstract

Compassion is a crucial tenet of the healthcare industry. It enhances healthcare in meaningful and measurable ways. It has impact on the patient, the healthcare personnel as well as the workplace organization. Its benefits are multipronged and the workplace organization which employs compassionate healthcare and is engaged in measures to improve the same thrives and stands tall among the healthcare realm. Research in this aspect is much needed and could provide the backbone and the reason for mitigating employee burnout, fatigue and desensitization.

Keywords: Compassion, Healthcare, Holistic, Compassionate leadership.

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INTRODUCTION

Compassion is essential to every individual and to every organisation benefitting those who receive and those who provide it. Compassionate practices in healthcare fosters employee well- being, enhances motivation and new learning methodologies, reduces errors, absenteeism and stress.

Collective, inclusive, compassionate leadership, effective teamwork, compassionate design, and a change from the mindset of visualizing the organization as a machine to visualizing it as a living, dynamic, intricate system is essential. Healthcare organizations must be able to develop and maintain compassionate cultures and leadership in order to continue providing safe, high-quality, patient-centred care even in times of crisis. This was particularly evident during the time of Covid-19. Those organizations which prioritized compassionate healthcare thrived. Fostering such an attitude provides shared purpose, a sense of belonging and the mental satisfaction of working for the betterment of other lives [1].

Healthcare systems today are struggling to meet increasing demand due to rise in chronic diseases, cancer cases and the aftermath of covid 19. The all-encompassing corporate culture in the healthcare set up makes it difficult for compassionate healthcare to be meted out. Compassionate healthcare becomes an absolute necessity when dealing with different healthcare scenarios.

Compassion creates distress tolerance. It encourages positive emotions resulting in an approach mindset rather than a withdrawal mindset. Studies on brain plasticity proved that compassion activates neural networks connected to caring, feelings of social connection and altruism [2]. Compassion in health care system has to be examined with the view point of ethics, psychology, interpersonal relationship with patients, care of ‘at risk’ categories of patients.

REVIEW

Compassionate care:

Compassion is defined as “*sensitivity to suffering in self and others with a commitment to try to alleviate and prevent it*” [3]. Compassion is intrinsically different from empathy. Empathy is when we are sensitive to the other person’s suffering. Compassion is when we see ourselves in the other person’s shoe and takes responsive action to alleviate that person’s suffering. Viewed from the patient’s perspective, being cared for by a compassionate clinician speeds up recovery. Evidence underlines this irrevocable fact [4]. Empathy and compassion has been inversely associated with caregiver burnout. It also provides for ‘compassion satisfaction’ [5]. Compassionate leadership and compassionate healthcare are an urgent need not just in the healthcare set up but also in the political and societal landscape. It leads to optimising of the patient care and well-being of the healthcare personnel [6].

Compassionate leadership:

Healthcare personnel are exposed to myriad scenarios wherein suffering is intrinsic like caring for the terminally ill patients and patients who are chronically ill and debilitated. They also have to face workplace bullying, and sometimes have to deal with moral distress [7].

Compassionate management of a healthcare organization is essential for excellence of the organization. Management studies discuss 'organizational compassion' as a "NEAR" process. The tenets of "NEAR" being N- Noticing a person's suffering, E-Empathizing with the person's suffering, A- assessing the circumstances and R- responding with actions aimed at lessening or alleviating that suffering [8,9].

The organizational definition of compassion is as follows "*The proactive, systematic, and continuous identification, alleviation and prevention of all sources of workplace suffering*". This definition acknowledges the unique fact that work in the healthcare industry accrues to more suffering than other industries [10]. Perceptions of compassion among healthcare teams reflect organizational perceptions of compassion and therefore staff engagement [11].

Compassionate healthcare during Covid-19 pandemic:

The pandemic had created a lot of stretch on an already overburdened healthcare system worldwide. At earlier times when vaccines was not available, healthcare personnel faced a lot of fear and were relocated to confined environments where treatment for the affected patients had to be done. PPE was in short supply, there was an extraneous demand on the staff, burdening them much more. Staff were more likely to be infected in the line of duty causing death and a decrease of the already strained staff workforce. The increase in the loss of life of staff members caused a lot of distress and grief among their co-workers. UK and other countries saw a lot of elderly death in the care homes of social care. The fear of infecting their friends and family forced the healthcare personnel to stay away from them depriving them of much needed moral support. The second wave saw a lot of patient deaths with lack of support for health care personnel, the situation becoming hostile sometimes. In the third wave, we are now seeing fewer hospital admissions and death, thanks to vaccine immunity.

The positive side of the Covid era was a renewed vigor, sense of purpose among health care personnel. They overstretched themselves in patient care eliciting appreciation and validation from the public. Organisations also temporarily shifted from their pre-occupation with financial safeguards, bureaucratic safeguards resulting in a strengthened team and enhanced care. With respect to NHS, several initiatives were introduced to improve patient care as well as staff support, the initiation of 'corona voice' a web based platform being one among them [1].

Non compassionate care:

There are a number of studies outlining non- compassionate care especially towards the more susceptible sectors of society [12]. Elderly faced the most unjust treatment [13]. Few studies show African- Americans to be the most affected [14]. There have been reports of pregnant women being provided abusive care during child birth [15].

Compassionate use of force:

As implicated in the terminology, in certain scenarios force has to be used, as in a behavioural or medical crisis, where a persistent threat of harm exists to self as well as healthcare personnel. When anti-psychotic medicine is forcibly administered when patients are either harming themselves or making others unsafe is construed as 'compassionate care'.

Compassionate care does not confine itself to the patient but extends to the care giver. Multitudes of anecdotes abound in world literature wherein patients assault care givers causing grievous harm. This could cause ‘compassion fatigue’ resulting in negative coping strategies, alcohol and drug use and diminished capacity of feeling sympathy and empathy. Therefore, it’s essential to reinforce clinician’s motive and intentions of providing compassionate care during the application of force. This helps in addressing burnout. Adequate staffing and management support is imperative for healthcare units dealing with agitated patients who are acutely ill [16].

Compassionate drug use:

A promising drug can be made available to the patient after passing through all the phases of a clinical trial. “Glaxo Wellcome” a pharmaceutical giant made its anti – HIV drug available to 22,000 patients during its phase- III trial [17]. “Expanded access” is the alternative scientific terminology for this concept. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines compassionate use (CU) as a *“program that is intended to provide potentially life-saving experimental treatments to patients suffering from a disease for which no satisfactory authorized therapy exists and/or who cannot enter a clinical trial. For many patients, these programs represent their last hope.”*

Compassionate healthcare to head and neck cancer patients:

There is very limited literature on compassionate healthcare to head and neck cancer (HNC) patients. HNC patients are a unique subset of cancer patients whose cancer symptoms are severe and the morbidity and side effects of treatment are intense. They require continuous active care from an interprofessional team who will be able to address their individual treatment needs and care. In this setting, the attributes of the Oral surgeon and other affiliated healthcare workers treating the patient are under scrutiny. A person who is not self-compassionate might not be equipped to provide compassionate healthcare. Health care professionals who take a holistic approach to provide healthcare to the patients in need are considered to be more compassionate [18]. The most imperative need of all patients who were consulted as part of the particular study was 100% honesty from the healthcare professional who was able to advise them on the treatment options needed in a knowledgeable manner and give a realistic update [19].

CONCLUSION

Compassion in the healthcare industry has not just meaningful benefits but measurable benefits too. Compassion has the benefit of reducing the associated stress thereby reducing the risk of mortality. Despite popular contention, motives do matter. Authentic altruism gives measurable benefits improving longevity, reducing stress and overall adding to the meaning of life. Compassion not just benefits healthcare personnel but upholds workplace ethics too. It should not be considered as the sole responsibility of healthcare workers but should be inculcated in the workplace itself. Compassionate leadership assists, enhances and empowers compassionate healthcare.

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There are no conflicts of interest

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