

## Meeting of the Heads of Medical Psychology Chairs and Units at the Medical University of Warsaw

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A working meeting of the Medical Psychology Chairs and Units from Polish medical universities took place at the Medical Psychology Unit (MPU), Medical University of Warsaw (MUW), on 8 May 2012. The meeting was devoted to training in psychology at medical universities within the context of present and future activities.

One of the main reasons for organizing this meeting was the heated media debate at the turn of 2012 on physicians' inability to talk to patients and their families. The initiative evoked considerable interest from Professor Janusz Kleinrok, Director of the Department of Science and Higher Education at the Ministry of Health. One of the reasons for this concern was the large number of patient complaints addressed to the Patients' Ombudsman and the Physicians' Councils. Media coverage was very good.

Toward the close of 2011 Mr Bartosz Arłukowicz, the Minister of Health, established a Commission for the Humanization of Medicine. One of the objectives of this commission is to improve the quality of communication. Professor Tomasz Pasierski MD and Professor Krzysztof Owczarek, both from the Warsaw University of Medicine, were invited to participate in this collegial body. They put forward the proposal to the Ministry of Health to introduce a new subject for medical students, "Doctor-Patient Relations".

The meeting at the MPU MUW was convened to discuss this valuable initiative and to present the contents of the syllabuses taught at the Unit. Professor Krzysztof Owczarek, Head of the Medical Psychology Unit, Medical University of Warsaw, chaired the discussions. First on the agenda was a detailed presentation of the motion of the Commission for the Humanization of Medicine at the Ministry of Health to apply psychological knowledge to improve physicians' relations with patients and their families. Second on the agenda was a communication concerning the activity of the Medical Psychology Unit with respect to the teaching of medical psychology to medical departments, with special emphasis on various aspects of doctor-patient relations and adequate communication. These topics were presented by Dorota Włodarczyk MD and Magdalena Łazarkiewicz MA, postdoctoral fellow and assistant respectively at the MPU MUW.

Their presentation was about how contemporary psychological knowledge and novel teaching methods are currently applied at our unit to increase physician-patient relation competences and skills.

1. The previous and current syllabus:

- covers key issues in medical psychology which can be applied in medical practice;
- reflects contemporary trends in Polish and international medical psychology (we use the new textbook "Psychology in Medical Practice" written by the MPU faculty and rewarded by the Ministry of Health in 2009, as well as other state-of-the-art literature);
- meets the needs of physicians assessed in a Polish national survey (2005-2008) conducted by Professor Krzysztof Owczarek and his colleagues at the MPU WUM; in this survey physicians were asked to say what psychological knowledge they had gained during their medical studies and what their actual needs were in their professional practice;
- has been developed over more than a dozen years (and has been modified several times to include new trends in medical psychology and current social needs);
- has been realized so far within a 30-hour, 1-semester course for sixth-year students;
- is taught to students "initially unmotivated to study psychology" (as opposed to e.g. students of psychology), needs to be appropriately modified, and needs to be conveyed using appropriate teaching methods (highlighting the specificity of psychology vis-à-vis the medical sciences);
- students rate each course on completion.

## 2. The specific nature of the course

- sound academic-level training (knowledge test) combined with skills training (skills test – each student completes an individual assignment);
- knowledge learned in class is used to solve specific problems in clinical practice (direct link between knowledge and practical applications);
- priorities: patient and doctor under stress, the mechanisms of patient functioning in illness, doctor-patient relations, doctor-patient communication;
- psychological knowledge and skills help doctors treat the somatically ill patient: both doctor and patient are the focus of interest (psychological skills are to help both doctor and patient).

## 3. The Medical University of Warsaw – new trends in the teaching of psychology and the active role of the Medical Psychology Unit:

- increasing acceptance of the need to train medical students in psychology and practical psychological skills;
- the proposal to introduce a new subject (doctor-patient communication) with 20 hours of lectures, 20 hours of seminars and 20 hours of practicum (60 hours in all) – the Commission for the Humanization of Medicine at the Ministry of Health (Professor Krzysztof Owczarek, Head of the MPU, is a member of this Commission) – procedures have been set in motion;
- the psychological community views these changes as an expression of the serious commitment to improve physicians' competence in the area of doctor-patient relations;
- the changes are gradual (they take into consideration the current realities of training and functioning of the health care system) and progressive, as opposed to short-term media campaigns which are often based on a distorted representation of reality, where doctors (read: all doctors) do not know how to talk to patients (a generalized, harmful assessment of the medical profession), and view the situation from the patient's perspective only (without consideration for the realities of the doctors' work) and often take the form of a witch-hunt against the medical profession;
- this initiative has a chance of achieving lasting effects.

The MPU WUM team have been working consistently in this direction for many years, proposing an approach where patient and doctor are the focus of attention and both are significant partners in the patient-doctor relationship.

The last point on the agenda was a heated discussion. Discussants concluded that, given the present number of teaching hours allotted to units which teach psychology (usually 30 or less), it is extremely difficult to equip future doctors with sufficient knowledge and competences to develop mutually satisfactory relations with patients.

It is therefore hard not to agree that some doctors have insufficient knowledge and competence. This is particularly conspicuous when they are operating under stress or are taken by surprise by new and unforeseen events. However, before we jump to generalized conclusions, we must remember that doctors are sometimes confronted with challenges in their clinical practice which they should normally never have to deal with. We must also remember that in view of the frequently uncoordinated and chaotic changes in our health service, doctors sometimes work in quite extreme conditions. In addition to their clinical duties, which many of them feel are the easiest part of their job, the bureaucracy often confronts them with unacceptable difficulties and surprises. It is hard to accept the big quantifiers which communities "donned in judges' togas" brandish left and right. Typically but quite illegitimately sure of themselves, they use such words as "everybody" and "always" to convey unequivocally that patients are being harmed. The psychological community which teaches at medical universities has no intention of condoning everything doctors do but we all agree that opinion makers often go too far with their exaggerated generalizations. Such rhetoric formulations, if used too often and unconditionally, are simply not true. It is true, however, that everything we do can be done better and that we can try even harder. But we psychologists must be given a chance to teach future doctors how to communicate with their patients during our courses at the medical academies and universities. At present we are doing our best in the limited time we have at our disposal. However, we feel responsible for the preparation of future doctors for a job where communication with patients and their families is a basic element. Bearing this in mind, Professors T. Pasierski and K. Owczarek formulated a proposal to create a new subject, "Doctor-Patient Relations".

At the meeting a Work-Group for Teaching Psychology in Medicine was founded and it elected Professor Krzysztof Owczarek as its chairman. The group proposed that the new subject should

be called “The Psychology of Relations with Patients”. It also recommended the following organizational framework for the new subject:

- year III “Foundations of Psychology in Medicine (at least 30 hours);
- year V “The Psychology of Relations with Patients”.

We hope that the Ministry of Health will enable us to implement this necessary initiative in the medical studies syllabus and realize our goal, i.e. better utilization of clinical and health psychologists in the teaching of methods of development of adequate doctor-patient relations.