

# Empathy Behind the Scenes: Training future healthcare providers to treat opioid use disorder with a focus on patient narrative through forum theatre



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## Introduction

Future healthcare professionals commonly draw a great deal of their knowledge from didactic instruction and hands-on training, but focus continues to shift to the value of placing learners in innovative settings in order to hone their skills and better relate to the patients they treat. Rather than working with standardized patients in clinical settings, this study allowed students to observe and participate in a staged play outlining the challenges faced by a character named Joey who is in early recovery from opioid use disorder. Following medication for opioid use disorder case training, students followed Joey in a live one-hour performance via Zoom. Students were not only exposed to the unique obstacles of recovery but were also able to insert themselves into the action, transforming from passive observers into active participants. This content-based instructional method utilized forum theatre methodology to enable learners to "rehearse for reality." The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the impact of forum theatre as a medical education training modality.

## Methods

N=109 students (n=83, med students; n=26, nurse practitioner students) engaged in training to obtain a DATA waiver, which will allow them to prescribe buprenorphine in any medical setting and methadone in methadone clinics in the future. Following this training, students observed Joey in a live one-hour performance via Zoom. The play was styled according to forum theatre methodology, inviting audience members to actively participate in the onstage conflicts. Students were invited to participate in interviews about the play. N=12 students agreed to participate in an interview (n=1, nurse practitioner student; n=11, medical students).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematically analyzed. IRB approval #Pro00097494

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**"The stories that people tell about themselves in the midst of their illness matter a great deal."**

## Preliminary Results

### Favorite Part of the Play

- Complex and insightful narratives
- Production was authentic, well-acted, and high quality
- Personal connection to narrative enhanced effect
- Appreciated critical discussion of the production

### Least Favorite Part of the Play

- Preferred direct accounts to theatrical interpretation
- Lacked understanding of Forum Theatre
- Difficult to suspend disbelief
- Would have preferred in-person performance
- Play was too long

## Promoted Empathy

- Provided insight into recovery experience
- Provided insight into patients' personal challenges
- Exposed spectators to patient home life
- Opportunities to apply empathy in practice
- Inclusion of diverse and unique perspectives

## Preliminary Results

### Value of the Arts

- Provides therapeutic and educational value
- Provides insight into patients' lived experiences
- Helpful for those without exposure to recovery
- Allows students to "rehearse for reality"
- Students can directly visualize the effect of patient choices over a short period of time

### Barriers of Virtual Presentation

- Technical difficulties
- Awkward for audience to engage directly

### Suggestions for Future Directions

- Small group discussion of play
- Adjusting the timing of the play
- Shortening of the play
- Mandatory live attendance

## Discussion

Preliminary results indicated that overall the play was a good tool that promoted empathy. However, the virtual format had many drawbacks. The cumulative results will be utilized to inform future trainings and to refine the forum theatre approach to medical education.

## References

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