Story Time Project

Stories can serve as a platform for patients to discuss issues that affect them in a way they would otherwise be hesitant to reveal directly.

“The sun did not shine, it was too wet to play,” were the first words I can remember reading as a child. Of course this was probably because my parents read The Cat in the Hat to me about a billion times and after a while those 11 words would stick in my head. They were the key that would unlock a period of excitement in my day. Each time that story was read, the repetition brought about better understanding of what that crazy cat was doing. Over time I could tell parts of the story, I knew what was coming; I could fill in the sentences for my parents. Reading became storytelling, storytelling became a group sport. We laughed, as I would improvise endings that I presumed more suitable than Dr. Seuss’ (Theodor Seuss Geisel). Dr. Seuss’ books are childhood memories and evoke certain feelings, like a song or a smell, because of the situations they bring to my mind. When Dr. Seuss died in September of 1991, I remember feeling as if I had lost someone close to me. My fifth grade class even had a remembrance party for him, complete with a green cake baked by my mother!

During my third year of medical school, I rotated onto the child psychiatry inpatient unit; a 15-bed unit that serves children aged 5 to 12 years old with a wide range of psychopathologies. I learned that these children are often shuttled between foster homes, with little of the consistency and nurturance that is imperative for the growth of healthy children. During this rotation, I developed a relationship with a 7-year-old girl, who was desperate for someone to spend time with her. One day I asked

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started thinking about children with limited family support. It is an attempt to improve care for hospitalized patients who would not otherwise have visitors. Story Time occurs weekly during evening visiting hours, a stressful time of day when many patients become angry and sad because they do not receive visits from family members. Reading to children who are distressed is therapeutic and provides a soothing activity before bedtime. Furthermore, stories can serve as a platform for patients to discuss issues that affect them in a way they would otherwise be hesitant to reveal directly.

The Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at Mount Sinai developed the Beatrix Hamburg Medical Student Training Fellowship sponsored by the Klingenstein Third Generation Foundation in 2005. This mentorship program has been extremely successful and Story Time seeks to build on that success with a program that also provides a therapeutic activity for the children we serve. Ten residents and approximately ten medical students participate in Story Time, with two residents and one medical student at most leading the program during any given week. Story Time pairs medical students and junior psychiatry residents with more senior residents, allowing junior members to benefit from the senior's experience and fostering the senior's teaching and mentorship skills. Story Time is also an important opportunity for senior residents to assume a mentorship role that helps prepare them for the transition to faculty appointments in academic settings, where they can continue to attract medical students to the field.

Medical student volunteers participate in an introductory session, run by child and adolescent psychiatry faculty mentors, to orient them to the inpatient unit. Each Tuesday an announcement is made during the unit's morning report and community meeting that some doctors and medical students will be coming to the floor in the evening to read to kids who do not have visitors. In the evening when the children gather, everyone sits on the floor in a circle while two to three age-appropriate stories are read. The children are encouraged to participate and ask questions throughout. At the end of each story, questions are presented for the children to consider and discuss. At the end of each Story Time, the medical students have an opportunity to process the experience with the resident mentors. Monthly meetings with child and adolescent psychiatry faculty and residents enable the participants to discuss their experiences, suggest ways of improving the program, and share stories that lead to fruitful sessions.

At the end of The Cat in the Hat, the Cat redeems himself by restoring the children's home back to normal. The mother returns, the cat leaves, and all is remedied. Although Story Time will not restore order to the lives of these children, hopefully it will create a tiny sense of consistency and nurturance that will be paired with fond memories of reading.

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