



Using interactive theater to improve provider-family communication and promote inter-professional education and practice in palliative care



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ABSTRACT

Background: Palliative care practice often includes the need for health providers to have difficult conversations with patients and families. These conversations may include discussing diagnoses, prognoses, test results and care options.

Purpose: This innovative project used interactive theater as a means of teaching undergraduate and graduate health professional students evidence-based methods for delivering difficult health news in health care settings.

Method: The university partnered with a professional interactive theater company to host a production focused on care team communication and delivery of difficult health news to family caregivers of an older adult experiencing an acute stroke.

Discussion: The use of this modality allowed audience members to interact with the actors, who remained in character, to discuss the case scenario.

Conclusions: Audience members were surveyed using an investigator-developed posttest survey instrument, and positive quantitative and qualitative data confirmed the usefulness and feasibility of using interactive theater in educating health professionals.

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Introduction

One of the more difficult tasks for health providers is delivery of 'bad' or difficult health news to patients and their families, particularly in the setting of adult palliative care. 'Bad' news means life-altering health news or life limiting diagnosis or prognosis. Patients and families need to hear this news in order to begin making decisions for care.¹ What do families and patients value in receiving difficult health news? Jurkovich, Pierce, Pananen and Rivara² found that it was especially important that providers had knowledge not

only in the content of the message, but in the strategy they used to deliver the news. Communicating difficult or 'bad' news is an essential competency for health providers, especially at the end of life,³ but it can be challenging and stressful. Communication training may be lacking in health provider education. Skills in knowing how to use evidence-based strategies to communicate with patients and families about a patient's terminal health status allows providers, patients and families to explore joint decision making.⁴ Communication skills can be taught, retained, and practiced.⁵ Beale and Kudelka⁶ asked clinicians what they found particularly difficult about these kinds of patient encounters and clinicians stated that their toughest challenges included: (1) talking about end of active treatment and initiating palliative care, (2) telling patients about recurrence of disease, (3) little training in breaking bad news science, (4) being honest but not taking away hope – finding that balance and (5) not feeling comfortable in dealing with patients' emotions or their own.

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Purpose

The purpose of this article is an evaluation of the method of using interactive theater as an educational tool to increase knowledge about communication in palliative care for health professionals and health professional students. Interactive theater was used with a group of inter-professional health care students and community clinicians. A mid-sized public southeastern university partnered with a professional interactive theater group to work toward the goal of promoting attitude and intended behavior change among audience members seeking to improve their awareness of the need to develop communication skills with family members around end of life decision making. There were three parts to the project: (1) develop a realistic script focusing on conversations between providers and family members around end of life decision making on behalf of loved ones (2) use an interactive theater methodology to promote audience participation, engagement of these issues, and dialogue around these issues and (3) evaluate the impact and efficacy of this methodology as a means to educate a local university health care community around these issues.

Background: the university

This health professional college was founded in 2010, and brought together several schools educating future health providers. The college acts as the doorway for the university to make a positive impact on the health and quality of life of residents in the region, state, and beyond. This college joined several schools educating health professional students with a mission to enhance health and quality of life across the lifespan for individuals, families and communities. Strategies employed to meet this mission include innovation and excellence in workforce development, scholarship, research, professional service and community engagement. The interactive theater program took place during a university-wide Health & Human Services Week, the College's signature health care community engagement event which included a variety of programs highlighting faculty, student, and community expertise in the health and human services professions. An interdisciplinary group of university faculty collaborated to write an internal grant to fund the interactive theater group's performance in spring 2015 on campus. Once the grant was funded, plans began to develop a partnership with the interactive theater group. Plans also included advertising the performance to our campus community (students, faculty and staff) and community health providers and agencies providing care to adults with serious illness.

Developing a partnership: interactive theater

The exchange of ideas between universities and the community provides mutual benefits for all involved.^{7,8} Allied health professions, particularly nursing and social work, emphasize the importance of community education as an integral part of the values of each profession. Engaging with local partners allows students to learn and faculty to stay connected to their fields of practice while meeting the needs of the local area.⁹ While allied health disciplines struggle to bring inter-professional groups of students together in the classroom and in the community due to with conflicting course schedules, facilitating inter-professional events may be a contributing factor to successful communities of clinicians. A key component to community education is creating an experience that is welcoming. This includes being accessible, affordable, and applicable.

In seeking a partnership with a professional interactive theater performance group, the university sought to raise awareness about

provider patient communication in adult palliative care settings. The university was able to provide space and accessibility and the event was free to attend. Health care students, faculty and local community partners (hospitals, hospices, and community and public health practitioners) were invited to attend the event that addressed an issue of interest to all – how to start conversations around end of life decision making. The protocol was submitted to the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and it was determined to be exempt from further review.

Our partnership with the professional interactive theater group grew out of the personal experience of one of the authors, who had attended a prior local performance of this theater group last year relating to perinatal palliative care. The experience of viewing and participating as an audience member was both powerful and empowering, particularly since it involved the smallest and most vulnerable of patient populations. As the authors began exploring means to involve both university and community participants in the initiation of discussions surrounding end of life decisions for adults, excitement grew as consideration was given to the possibility of utilizing this interactive theater group to raise awareness of these concepts here on campus. After contacting the director of the theater group, the authors were informed that the theater group was already working on the development of an interactive theater performance focusing on an adult palliative care scenario. The scene involved a provider breaking bad news to two family members about the terminal diagnosis of their aging parent, and the crux of the conflict was a difference of opinion between the family members about the choices for care for their loved one.

Interactive theater

Interactive theater is a burgeoning experiential leaning methodology that has been used to educate diverse communities around a wide variety of health and health education issues. It has been used to: (1) educate gastroenterologists better ways to communicate around functional diagnosis such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome and raise awareness of cultural competence¹⁰; (2) foster critical dialogue around diversity issues with medical school faculty¹¹ and college/university faculty^{12,13}; (3) improve public-private dialogue in developing nations¹⁴ and provide sexual assault education with undergraduate students¹⁵; and (4) address HIV and other reproductive health issues with teens in communities in developing nations among others.¹⁶ Intimate partner violence prevention was the focus of a community-generated approach to use interactive theater with multiple Asian communities.¹⁷ Lightfoot and colleagues also used this modality to pilot an HIV prevention intervention to educate a Southern U.S. high school student population about sexual health, HIV knowledge and HIV stigma reduction.¹⁸ Medical students at a Midwestern medical school also responded positively when interactive theater was used to stimulate reflection about evidence-based strategies to break bad news to patients with cancer.¹⁹ Psychologist Wayne Beach is currently using theater to produce "When Cancer Calls," a National Cancer Institute-funded film project to document how family members communicate about and manage cancer.²⁰

Theater Delta is a five year old company founded by Director Dr. Ben Saypol, based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, that has developed interactive theater projects with numerous medical communities, colleges and universities, the United States military, the World Bank, and other communities. Since Theater Delta's inception in 2010, they have developed numerous projects in the field of medicine which explore ethical challenges related to health and health care. Examples include physician-patient communication in the hospital setting, provider-patient communication in perinatal

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