Bernard Lown, MD, a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, writes the following in his *The Lost Art of Healing: Practicing Compassion in Medicine*: “Medicine’s profound crisis, I believe, is only partially related to ballooning costs, for the problem is far deeper than economics. In my view, the basic reason is that medicine has lost its way, if not its soul. An unwritten covenant between doctor and patient, hallowed over several millennia, is being broken.” (p. xiii)

To engage in the art of healing, you will have to cultivate compassion by offering compassion. But there is a compassion-stifling milieu that is referred to as “the hidden curriculum.” In fact, on empathy scales, medical students show lower levels in the third year as they move through clerkship programs. Compassionate care is fragile. It can be overwhelmed by cynical hierarchies and by poor role models. It can be hampered by the dualistic view that somehow a patient’s emotions and thoughts do not directly impact health outcomes. It is not good enough to delegate compassion to the nurses, or to palliative care physicians.

In addition to being hallmark of physician virtue, compassionate care has a direct positive bearing on medical outcomes, adherence to treatment, patient satisfaction, and even accuracy of diagnosis. It may even save time, it certainly prevents law suits, and it clearly makes clinical practice more meaningful and fulfilling.

We will cover the tension between compassion and detachment in the art of healing in the history of American medicine, the impact of compassionate care on patients, and the impact of such care on clinicians.

**Objectives**

At the end of this session:
1. Students will be able to discuss their responsibility to treat patients as persons with insights from scientific investigations
2. Students will be able to explain mind-body and emotion-body connections that make the dynamic of compassionate care essential to patient well-being and to clinical outcomes.
3. Students will elaborate on one the essential virtues of the physician.

**Competencies**

Updated: 2/10/2010
With regard to the overall objectives, this session pertains to the objectives of building relationships and professional identity. Students are expected to develop greater awareness of how emotions, attitudes and behaviors effect patient care.

Professionalism, communication

**Preparation**

1. Write a one sentence definition of compassionate care and bring it to class for discussion.
2. Think of an experience of compassionate care as you or someone you know has experienced it, and be ready to bring this up in class discussion (study question 1, below).
3. Read the assigned two articles.

**Process**

This session will begin with a presentation on compassionate care (SGPost), and conclude with a personal perspective from a GI surgeon and poet (Maria Basile).

**Small Group Tasks & Assignments**

1. Review and briefly discuss the cases & vignettes provided (20 minutes)
2. Review and discuss the study questions below (40 minutes)
3. Send your definition of “compassionate care” (no more than 50 words) to Stephen.Post@StonyBrook.edu by March 1 (voluntary, ungraded, altruistic) and you will receive editorial comments back

**Study Questions**

1. Can you describe your most memorable experience with a compassionate physician?
2. How important is it for an otherwise competent physician to be compassionate?
3. Do you think that some people are by nature more compassionate than others?
4. What might be some biological mechanisms by which compassionate care impacts physical health?
5. Do you think that compassionate care can be taught in general, and in medical school specifically? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. If compassion/empathy in medical students does decline by the end of the third, as some research suggests, can you offer any explanations for this? (see Hojat et al., below) How might this erosion be avoided? What will be your strategies?
7. Can you describe an experience that you or a friend have had where you felt diminished or possibly humiliated in a clinical encounter?

**Articles on File**
**Required Readings**


**The Best Books Out There**


**Resource Links**

[www.stonybrook.edu/bioethics](http://www.stonybrook.edu/bioethics)