

Eliminating the sterility of a patient-doctor relationship during the corona era

To the Editor:

Empathy is a well-known concept whose roots can be found in ancient Greek philosophy. However, there is ambiguity about its definition, and it has been formulated differently over the years. According to Kohut's advanced concept, empathy is the ability to think and feel into the inner world of others and to experience and respond to the feelings of others [1].

In the context of patient care, empathy is defined as the healthcare provider's ability to understand a patient's feelings and thoughts and effectively communicate that understanding. Empathy has been shown as predictor of better patient healthcare outcomes, patient satisfaction, and improvement in the wellbeing of the treatment provider [2,3]. Empathy is a core value in modern medicine and healthcare.

During this period of the global coronavirus epidemic, leading to quarantines and social distancing, people must deal with feelings of loneliness. Loneliness was found to be a predictor of negative physical and mental processes [4]. Medical staff in coronavirus wards wear extensive personal protective equipment (PPE). As a result of the necessary PPE worn by medical staff during the corona crisis, feelings of social remoteness and loneliness among patients may increase, and both the patients and the medical staff are robbed the ability to give and receive empathy using face-to-face communication.

More than Masks (Hebrew: Meir Panim) is a project developed and founded in Israel by medical students. As students we became aware of the difficult working conditions our fellow medical staff colleagues had to endure in corona wards. Not only was the time spent by the medical staff in the corona ward itself restricting, new physical

barriers, in the form of PPEs, were added.

Our colleagues felt that their human connection with the patients was interrupted and were also having a difficult time recognizing one another. We came up with a rather easy solution: printing stickers with faces of the staff members on them and placing these stickers on the chest and back of their PPE. Word spread quickly about the More than Masks initiative on social media and national news. The project has expanded not only to corona wards but also to other wards in need such as geriatric and children's medical centers, in which a smiling sticker of the medical staff member can alleviate anxiety and may even help prevent the occurrence of states such as delirium.

Figure 1. A nurse at the corona ward, Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, Israel, behind the glass wall of the restricted corona area. The nurse is wearing a sticker with her photograph on her personal protective equipment. She is making a heart shaped sign with her hands to show her appreciation and gratitude for the More than Masks project



Seeing the medical staff can promote feelings of closeness and help patients see that there are those who see them and try to fine-tune themselves to their needs. The effort to understand the patient experience and act in a way that reflects and addresses patient needs is the essence of empathy.

As of June 2020, the project has printed stickers for approximately 2200 medical staff members from 42 corona wards in 16 different hospitals in Israel.

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