

Essay: future changes to doctors' roles



Essay question: "Doctors of the future will face many challenges over and above those pertaining to diagnosis and treatment of disease. Their role in society; patients' expectations and their access to information on health matters; and the legal and regulatory environment of medical practice are all changing. Elaborate briefly on what these changes are and discuss their implications for you as an aspiring physician"

Change is defined as an act or process through which something becomes different. Bound together with time, we have to learn to adapt to these differences as we advance in time. In healthcare, such changes include; changes in society, technological advances, scientific discovery and even clinical practice. These in turn have effect on the roles of doctors in society & the expectations of their patients.

Medicine is the science or practice of the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease. As ambassadors of medicine, physicians connect science with society. A physician is defined as a person qualified to practise medicine, especially one who specializes in diagnosis and medical treatment as distinct from surgery. The roles and expectations of a physician are embedded into its definition itself. However, science and society is never constant. Its volatile nature creates proportional change to the roles of doctors in society.

Being applicants of medicine, the roles of a physician are simple; diagnose, treat, prevent. However these roles have changed over the years. In the past, doctors used to have to deal with hoards of patients. With such a doctor - patient ratio, quality of service could not be maintained at a high.

However in a changing society, the ratio has improved dramatically. The number of physicians and patients have increased and decreased respectively. But this improvement also created a demand for improvement in quality of health services.

Nowadays, physicians are not only required to provide physical treatment. They are also a turn to for emotional support. The term 'Medicine' originated from its Latin ancestor 'Medicus'. When translated directly to English, 'Medicus' is known as 'Physician'. This progression from the term 'Medicus' to the present term 'Medicine' is a good representation of the progressive development of the role of a physician. Now, 'Medicus' no longer only encompasses the 'Physician' and his or her ability to tend to the physical health of a patient. Medicine also involves the physician to tend to the emotional and mental health of the patient. Previously, due to the high number of patients, there was insufficient time for doctors to tend to secondary needs of the patient. Currently, besides being able to make an accurate diagnosis, the roles of a physician also include empathy. Empathy is a vehicle for compassion and allows physicians to create a personal relationship with their patients. It puts the doctor into the patient's shoes, allowing them to realize the emotional, mental and social aspects to medicine. However, sometimes too much empathy can result in doctors getting too emotionally attached to the outcome of their patients and can cause unnecessary stress. An example could be female physicians producing a higher suicide rate as compared to their male counterparts as females tend to be more emotional. In this day and age, the roles of a physician are not

only what is found in its definition, but also includes the welfare of their patient.

Patients of the past and present both share a common expectation; treatment and cure. They see doctors as a solution to their health. However over the years, the list of patient expectations is far longer than just a remedy for their health. Medicine has become more patient oriented. Its demand for empathy for patients is a clear landmark of this progression. Along with this progression is also the progression and change of patient expectations.

As mentioned earlier, doctors had too many patients and too little time. Over the years, the public has become more educated and have a better sense of personal health care, decreasing the number of patients. More people have enrolled in Medical School and have thus increased the number of physicians, improving the doctor - patient ratio. This improvement has created change in patient expectations. Patients expect physicians to be empathetic and to cater to emotional, social and mental aspects of their health condition. The advancement of medical research has also increased knowledge on the human body which resulted in the specializing of doctors into different streams of medicine. However, this gift of greater knowledge created a demand by patients for a more specialized service than what was available many years ago.

Before the development of 24 hour hospitals or the Accident & Emergency department, medical care was not immediate. Doctors had to travel out to patients' homes to tend to them. This increase in accessibility and

convenience of healthcare services has also changed expectations of patients. Patients now expect immediate service as compared to when patients then had to wait for the doctor to arrive at their homes.

Aside from these improvements in healthcare, there is one change in society which trumps them all; the innovation and advancement of technology. The word “physician” originated from its Latin form “physica”. The term “physica” was described as “things relating to nature”. The progression of the word from its Latin form to its English derivative clearly depicts the transformation of Medicine; the use of nature, to the development and use of current science & technology. Back then, the lack of technology also left doctors with the power of observation and qualitative reasoning to make a diagnosis, or more realistically speaking, a ‘smart guess’ of the patient’s condition.

The medical field has been privileged to benefit from the advancement in technology. Such advancements ranged from the early French invention of the stethoscope to the American invention of Magnetic Resonance Imaging. The pin point accuracy of technology today allows physicians to make more accurate and precise diagnoses. It has improved the efficiency of physicians as compared to when they had to spend a few days observing the patient in order to make a diagnosis. Technology has also opened the door to greater forms of research, which allows for future discoveries and inventions. This in turn increases the knowledge of physicians and allows for improvement in patient care.

However there is one advancement in technology that has greatly impacted the medical field in terms of clinical practice; the internet. Usually, any technological advances in medicine are controlled by the physician. However the internet differs from other technological advances as the World Wide Web can be accessed by both patient and physician. This world-wide access to information on health matters has caused many changes in patient expectations and the roles of a physician.

Traditionally, doctors were patients' answer to any medical concerns. However, the internet has broken that tradition. Being the world's greatest source of information, the amount of information the internet holds has no boundaries. Pubmed, a composition of 23 million citations for biomedical literature, can be easily found on the internet. This information can be accessed by anyone and everyone. Even the information which physicians consult from time to time can be accessed by patients. Medical students consult Google on a daily basis when faced with any uncertainty of their content. Professors and lecturers teaching these future doctors also make references to different websites found on the internet. Videos found on popular streaming site, YouTube, also contain medical and surgical procedures uploaded by distinguished physicians and surgeons that can be viewed by everyone. With access to such information, patients can learn about different diseases and the ways to prevent them. An ounce of prevention is always better than a pound of cure.

The internet is undeniably the best source of medical information. However every pro comes with a con. Patients now have prioritized the internet over the doctor. Nowadays, patients choose to consult Google before consulting

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doctors. Patients look to online forums, consulting others who have had somewhat similar symptoms to themselves. Patients tend to self diagnose themselves after looking up what diseases come with the symptoms they have. What patients don't realize is that different sicknesses can have common symptoms. This access to information on diseases and their symptoms can trigger unnecessary hypochondria and result in patients assuming they may have a disease more tragic than what it really is.

In a different scenario, those who have consulted their doctor first tend to consult the internet after for different forms of treatment for what they have been diagnosed with. These patients suffer from a condition of believing anything seen on screen. What is forgotten is that popular research sites, such as Wikipedia, pool information contributed and cited by the users of the internet. However not all information on Wikipedia is cited, some of which still require a citation. Some websites which provide false information online tend to hyperlink viewers to other sites which promote the same false information. Multiple sites with the same information tend to create a sense of authenticity despite the information being false. With this information in hand, patients present it to their doctors and when told it is untrue, they insist on its authenticity and blame doctors on being ignorant or being uninformed.