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Story Slam Rx: Is Connection to Personal Stories in Medicine an Antidote to Burnout

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**Story Slam Rx: Is Connection to Personal Stories in Medicine an
Antidote to Burnout**

An Advanced Integration Scholarly Project Manuscript

by

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Medical Student

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ABSTRACT

Story Slam Rx: Is Connection to Personal Stories in Medicine an Antidote to Burnout

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With the increasing demands of the contemporary healthcare system, providers are spending less time with colleagues in a team environment or engaged in direct patient care. This has been identified as a key factor in physician dissatisfaction and burn out.¹ The Story Slam event aims to reconnect providers and trainees with their sense of meaning by focusing attention on their stories. Under the conceptual umbrella of “narrative medicine,” there is growing recognition that the stories that run beneath the medical encounter can provide important insights and represent a pathway to greater well-being for providers.^{2,3} Our study has a two-fold approach. Initially, it aims to evaluate the concept of venting, sharing, and storytelling as a means of reinvigorating the medical space. Secondly, it serves as a quality improvement project, given that we hypothesize a renewed sense of accomplishment and a decreased sense of burnout -even if only temporary. This will subsequently lead to increased job satisfaction, improved employee performance, and heightened quality of life.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It has long been said that employees are a company's most valuable asset.⁵ If the expectations of employees are not met, the resulting decrease in motivation and needed to reach peak performance and excel, can be detrimental -and in the case of physicians- deadly.

Although in the more general arena, factors such as heavy workloads, team conflicts, and poor management have often been cited as the main culprits of a lack of joy while working, in the medical sphere, burnout seems to be the most consistent contributor to workplace dissatisfaction.^{4,6,7,8} Key contributors to burnout have been noted to include a fleeting sense of accomplishment -often due to sometimes seemingly ungrateful patients-, a lack of work-life balance, and a sense of being drained from the nature of the work. One method that has long been identified as a cathartic tool in the medical profession has been the art of expression.^{9,10} Expression, whether through venting to classmates or having debrief meetings with colleagues has served as a successful mechanism of releasing pent up frustration, being reminded of the reason we are fighting the good fight, and ultimately, having our hard work and sacrifices validated. The idea is that this expression has the power to decrease that feeling of burnout, and subsequently provide fuel for healthcare workers to perform at the highest possible level.

In this project, that expression was to be put to the test in real-time. As healthcare workers took the stage and shared their stories, we aimed to evaluate if there were direct effects on their self-evaluated level of burnout, by using surveys which were designed to get an idea of their emotional state in the time surrounding their story presentations.^{11,12}

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Our Story Slam event is modeled on National Public Radio's (NPR) Moth Program. The format includes a pre-performance two-hour workshop intended to teach the essential components of effective storytelling, followed by an event at which stories are shared in front of an audience -with narratives being based on a pre-determined theme. Story Slam Rx is a well-established platform at the University of Vermont's Larner College of Medicine, at which local healthcare workers share stories of their experiences. This year, we planned to distribute anonymous pre-event surveys to participants asking questions about their job satisfaction and sense of burnout. Subsequently we planned to then distribute anonymous post-event surveys to the same participants, to see if those results would be the same changed in the immediate aftermath. Due to a highly increased number of Coronavirus-19 cases following the arrival of the Omicron variant, the event had to be postponed, and a sizeable number of participants were no longer able to partake. As a result of the uncertainty surrounding the event, we focused instead on distributing post-event surveys only, to gauge morale for storytellers following the event. The survey began by asking six questions that provided demographic information of participants. Following that portion, the participants were asked questions that got at the level of accomplishment, emotional drain, and balance in quality of life they felt as medical workers. The survey finished with an open-ended space to share thoughts following the event, which we used to try and identify common words -and subsequently themes- in storyteller reflection.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Upon completion of the Story Slam Rx event, three of the expected ten original participants ultimately shared their stories. Compared to the previous iteration of this project from three years ago, the responses -although not universal- showed less variation. 67% of participants described themselves as either agreeing or highly agreeing that they felt a sense of accomplishment in their work, with 33% stating that they neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt accomplishment. In relation to data collected at the previous Story Slam Rx event three years ago, this displays an increase in sense of accomplishment, as at that time closer to 50% of participants agreed or highly agreed that they felt accomplished at work. Regarding feeling emotionally drained, 33% of respondents agreed that they felt emotionally drained, 33% disagreed that they felt drained, and 33% neither agreed nor disagreed. Of note, data from the 2019 Story Slam Rx event showed greater than 50% of respondents either disagreeing or highly disagreeing that they felt drained from their work. Additionally, 100% of respondents stated that they disagreed that they did not feel as though they had time for outside activities, which contrasted the nearly 50% of participants in 2019 that either agreed or highly agreed with this statement. Finally, when evaluating the free response portion of the survey, common themes included but were not limited to: a deep sense of connection, a positive and collaborative environment, a sense of community, and the feelings of relief, bravery, and growth. These themes can be contrasted with those from the 2019 survey, which were dominated by the feelings of liberation, vulnerability, impact, safety, and support.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Sharing stories at the Story Slam Rx event served as a cathartic release, provided heightened sense of accomplishment, and was an agent for relieving burnout. When looking at the narrative responses from storytelling participants, there are clear indications that the event had a positive impact. Although the data generally supports the premise of the study -being that the storytelling experience will serve to both provide relief for burned out healthcare workers, while also improving the quality of their work- there were certainly some unexpected variables. Most importantly, the postponement of the event, secondary to a spike in COVID-19 numbers, caused a significant decrease in available study participants as well as the removal of the pre-event survey. The most significant impact of such a change is that as a result, there was less ability to directly correlate our survey responses with the event, given that we were unable to evaluate for changes in responses. In the future we will not only analyze the significance of a pre-event survey, but we will also expand the study to include audience members, as we assess the impact hearing these stories, in addition to telling them. Additionally, expanding the survey design in order to try and pinpoint the causes burnout and/or relief, would serve to better calculate the impact of the Story Slam Rx event.

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