

RESEARCH IN ACTION:

Wharton's Ingrid Nembhard Explains How Empathy in Health Care Can Improve Patient Outcomes

THE PROBLEM:

Empathy for patients may seem like a lesser concern amid the many pressing challenges faced by health care professionals in delivering quality care. If a doctor graduated top of their class, is board certified, and has excellent clinical skills, does it matter if their bedside manner lacks empathy? Research from Wharton health care management professor Ingrid Nembhard finds the answer is an unequivocal yes. In the context of health care, empathy is defined as the understanding of and response to patients' emotions and perspectives. Empathy increases perspective taking, which increases understanding of the patient, which leads to better outcomes.

Simply put, empathy has a "positive cascading effect" for patients and even for the doctors, nurses, and technicians who care for them, Nembhard said.

"The more understanding that is present, the more patient-centered care plans are likely to be made, the better the patient care experience will be, and the greater patient adherence to their plans will be," she said. "That all means that we can expect better patient, worker, and organizational outcomes."

Empathy is especially important for patients who belong to underrepresented groups that tend to have worse health outcomes than the general population, such as Black and Hispanic/Latino. Nembhard said empathy can help reduce disparities for those patients because it increases cultural competency. When health providers understand the specific needs of underrepresented patients, they can help connect them to the right resources that can make the difference in their care plans.



THE RESEARCH:

In the paper, “A Systematic Review of Research on Empathy in Health Care,” Nembhard and her co-authors analyzed 50 years’ worth of empirical research on empathy, including more than 450 individual studies on the topic. In addition to finding that greater empathy resulted in better clinical outcomes and patient care experiences, their analysis also yielded five specific predictors of empathy among providers. They are: demographics, characteristics, behavior during interactions, target characteristics, and organizational context.

These predictors include factors such as whether a provider was a primary care physician with more personal knowledge of their patient versus a surgeon who may see a patient only in an acute care setting, whether the provider was introverted or extroverted, and their communication style. Target characteristics include whether the patient had a disease that elicited a more sympathetic response. And organizational context includes the length of time that patients spent with their provider – shorter visits correlated with less empathy.

THE SOLUTION:

Nembhard and her colleagues found a number of educational interventions that have been successful at increasing empathy among providers, but most are done at the individual level. Providers take a class or attend a seminar on building empathy skills, or they participate in simulations or exercises designed to do the same. Yet the data showed a surprising dearth in inventions at the organizational level. The scholars want that to change.

Nembhard said organizations need to take on the challenge of restructuring their systems to focus on patient empathy, much in the way that organizations have prioritized patient safety or medical innovation with positive results. An organizational priority on empathy takes the burden off the individual provider and integrates it into the work culture. And it reaps rewards beyond better patient outcomes -- providers may find greater job satisfaction in being able to deliver more personalized care.

“We’ve seen that organizational interventions can work,” Nembhard said. “If the provision of empathy benefits from having dedicated time and people and processes and leadership, then it makes sense that we need to direct greater attention to organizational interventions for improving empathy.”



THE SCHOLAR: *INGRID NEMBHARD*

Ingrid Nembhard is the Fishman Family President's Distinguished Professor, professor of health care management, and professor of management with a focus on organizational behavior. Prior to joining the faculty at Wharton, she was a professor at Yale University with appointments at the Yale School of Public Health and the Yale School of Management. She was also associate director of the health care management program and director of the training program in health services research at Yale.

Nembhard earned a bachelor's degree in ethics, politics, and economics and in psychology from Yale; a master's degree in health policy and management from Harvard University School of Public Health; and a Ph.D. in health policy and management, with a concentration in organizational behavior, from Harvard. She was honored with the 2023 Mid-Career Achievement Award from the Academy of Management's Health Care Management Division.

Nembhard's research focuses on how characteristics of health care organizations, their leaders, and staff contribute to their ability to implement new practices, engage in continuous organizational learning, and ultimately improve quality of care. She uses qualitative and quantitative research methods to examine health care delivery from provider and patient perspectives, and to evaluate organizational performance.

Nembhard said her research is driven by the personal belief that good health is central to having a good life.

"Everyone deserves a chance for a good life and access to good, quality health care, no matter their background," she said. "But backgrounds do matter, and acknowledging that can help us ensure that the health care we deliver fits each patient and is most effective for them. We have to meet patients where they are, and we have to do that with more empathy and respect."

The Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity (CEO) creates research-driven solutions to help current and future leaders ensure equity in business relationships and leadership. Dean Erika James, who is Wharton's first Black and first female dean, is emblematic of a paradigm shift in executive leadership. She has launched the Wharton Coalition for Equity and Opportunity as the hallmark of her leadership commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The initiative is being led by Kenneth L. Shropshire, Wharton emeritus professor of legal studies and business ethics. Shropshire is the former director of the Wharton Sports Business Initiative and former CEO of the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State University.