Introduction to Ethics: Bringing Humanity into the Healthcare Classroom
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Background: The traditional healthcare student attends school in a sequential manner. They may not have had either the experience of interacting with individuals with chronic healthcare issues or those who are aware that their disease is degenerative in nature. Effective communication in the healthcare arena, particularly in clinical research, requires an understanding of the informed consent process, which by definition requires competence. Loss of competence during a clinical trial, such as can be seen with degenerative diseases such as Parkinson’s disease, raises concerns about providing additional protections while preserving respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. This project was developed to provide students the opportunity to interact with individuals with different stages of Parkinson’s disease in order to provide real life experiences as a foundation to discuss ethical principles.

Methods: Two patients with Parkinson’s disease gave informed consent to participate in this IRB approved pilot project to establish a forum to discuss ethical questions in the context of actual patient experiences regarding clinical trials. The project consisted of three phases. Twenty preclinical nursing students were assigned an online tutorial on Parkinson’s disease and were asked to develop questions for the patients who had been invited to the classroom. Faculty members reviewed the questions and grouped them according to themes that were then summarized into a series of low literacy level direct questions. One patient attended each class for a total of four classes. Structured debriefing sessions followed each patient encounter. Common themes were identified and discussed.

Results: Three themes related to these encounters consistently emerged: Anticipation of direct benefit from clinical trials, limited understanding of concept of research; concerns about vulnerability with changing levels of cognition and decision making capacity over the course of a clinical trial (importance of Respect for Persons); and desire to contribute to greater good and to make decisions for the future when competency may become impaired.

Conclusions: Face to face interactions with patients, each with an awareness of their diminishing capacity, had a powerful impact on nursing students. Real life experiences highlighted in patient-classroom discussions provided insight into the ethical issues raised by research participation, as well as the importance of additional protections for vulnerable patients. Students felt they had a greater understanding of the ethical principles, outlined in the Belmont Report as a result of this
experience. They also felt this experience brought humanity into the classroom and enriched the curriculum.