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# Exploring perception and usage of narrative medicine by physician specialty: a qualitative analysis

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## Abstract

**Background:** Narrative medicine is a well-recognized and respected approach to care. It is now found in medical school curricula and widely implemented in practice. However, there has been no analysis of the perception and usage of narrative medicine across different medical specialties and whether there may be unique recommendations for implementation based upon specialty. The aims of this study were to explore these gaps in research.

**Methods:** Fifteen senior physicians who specialize in internal medicine, pediatrics, or surgery (5 physicians from each specialty) were interviewed in a semi-structured format about the utilization, benefits, drawbacks (i.e., negative consequences), and roles pertaining to narrative medicine. Qualitative content analysis of each interview was then performed.

**Results:** Three themes emerged from our analysis: roles, practice, and outcomes. Through these themes we examined the importance, utilization, barriers, benefits, and drawbacks of narrative medicine. There was consensus that narrative medicine is an important tool in primary care. Primary care physicians (general internists and general pediatricians) also believed that narrative medicine is not as important for non-primary care providers. However, non-primary care providers (surgeons) generally believed narrative medicine is valuable in their practice as well. Within specialties, providers' choice of language varied when trying to obtain patients' narratives, but choice in when to practice narrative medicine did not differ greatly. Among specialties, there was more variability regarding when to practice narrative medicine and what barriers were present. Primary care physicians primarily described barriers to eliciting a patient's narrative to involve trust and emotional readiness, while surgeons primarily described factors involving logistics and patient data as barriers to obtaining patients' narratives. There was broad agreement among specialties regarding the benefits and drawbacks of narrative medicine.

**Conclusions:** This study sheds light on the shared and unique beliefs in different specialties about narrative medicine. It prompts important discussion around topics such as the stereotypes physicians may hold about their peers and concerns about time management. These data provide some possible ideas for crafting narrative medicine education specific to specialties as well as future directions of study.

**Keywords:** Narrative Medicine, Physicians, Specialty, Medical Education

## Background

### Narrative medicine

While there is no consensus definition of narrative medicine [1], Rita Charon, who coined the term, defined it as practicing medicine with narrative competence [2]. Narrative competence is “the ability to acknowledge, absorb,

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