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“I WISH I’D LAID MY HAND ON HER SHOULDER”. FOSTERING COMPASSION IN FIRST-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENTS

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In order to care for sick people as whole persons, health personnel need awareness of how sickness afflicts human beings, and how health professionals affect patients’ ability to deal with disease and suffering. In medical education there is a well-documented dearth of teaching and learning about emotions and relational healing mechanisms. Medical students are not systematically educated in the “existential anatomy” of persons, and how to deal productively with uncertainty, embarrassment and helplessness.

In this highly participatory workshop, a concrete teaching method for first-year medical students, developed in Norway, will be shared. The method, called PASKON (“patient contact”) is anchored within a theoretical framework related to Whole Person Care, which is currently taught at McGill.

Central to PASKON is the encounter between novice medical students and very sick volunteers, both in the patients’ homes and in the classroom. Having to enter the intimacy sphere of a stranger, and be acknowledged as a health professional without feeling like one, is an orchestrated rite of passage that

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generates strong emotions and a wealth of material for reflection. More experienced students coach the first-years and assess their reflective essays.

The workshop will highlight the rationale for working with relationships, emotion and awareness in medical students. Participants will then be given roles as patients or students, and guided through a simulated session of PASKON, and reflections on the method and its potential applications.■