

What the world needs now ...

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Your newly minted diploma is ample representation of the culmination of your decades of hard work and sacrifice. You are excited to meet new colleagues in your city, to learn the faces behind their names, and to avail yourself for future patient referrals. So you begin calling each of their offices with the intention of making an appointment to introduce yourself and to bring a modest gift that represents your new office brand. All told, there are almost 4 dozen practitioners whose patients might benefit from your service. One by one, you reach out to each office to arrange a specified time for a meeting.

But the overall experience proves to be a disappointment. Although you are always punctual and have confirmed the time of every meeting, your arrival is often greeted by a perplexed look from the reception staff. You have frequently waited for the doctor for long intervals, without any feeling of warmth, welcome, or accommodation from the staff. There were even 2 instances where you waited for more than an hour, only to be told by a callous and unapologetic staff member that “The dentist had another emergency and therefore cannot see you today.” In another instance, after you finally got the opportunity to meet the practitioner, she returned your business cards to you stating that she had no use for them because she “uses someone else.” You returned to your office disheartened, with less confidence in the concept of professional collegiality.

We typically think of bioethics as a set of principles or guidelines used to navigate moral behavior. Aristotle advocated another perspective of ethics, labeled virtue ethics. Virtues are characteristics that are socially valuable and are positive descriptors of an individual's persona rather than principles or rules to guide behavior.¹

Compassion is one such virtue and is often confused with empathy. Empathy is the ability to live with or share in another person's positive or negative experience. Compassion involves the desire to improve another's predicament, and is described as a feeling *for* rather than a feeling *with* the other. Compassion often evolves

from an outgrowth of empathy, as an intention to eliminate the feeling of distress within the other individual.² Compassion and empathy are valuable attributes of health care providers.

Are we becoming less empathetic? In a classic study of 13,737 subjects of 72 samples of American college students evaluated from 1979 to 2009, levels of empathy decreased by 40% over that time, as assessed by means of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI). This is an established questionnaire format specifically designed to assess empathy levels. Another component of the IRI is perspective taking, which measures an individual's proclivity to adapt to another individual's perspective. This parameter also decreased significantly. Women tended to exhibit higher levels of empathy than men, and whites demonstrated lower levels than minorities. Empathy levels were consistent regardless of social status.³

Certainly the result of 1 study is insufficient to draw definitive conclusions, but these findings should pique our thoughts about the need for an increase in our own empathy levels. And an outgrowth of compassion from increased empathy would not be a bad thing. That applies not only to activities within our specialty, but with everyone we meet and in everything we do.

Dionne Warwick's ageless blockbuster hit of 1966, “What the World Needs Now Is Love,” beckons a more empathetic and compassionate world. The melody and verse, which are as applicable to compassion and empathy as they are to romantic affection, begin with the assertion, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.” Listen when you can. The song will resonate in your mind for hours afterward.

Perhaps those practitioners you attempted to visit ought to make a concerted effort to hear it as well.

REFERENCES

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3. Konrath S, O'Brian E, Hsing C. Changes in dispositional empathy in American college students over time: a meta analysis. *Pers Soc Psychol Rev* 2011;15:180-98.