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Opening the Lines of Communication for Patients With Contested Illnesses

Bethesda, MD — Contested illnesses are chronic conditions with non-specific, but quite distressing, symptoms and limited or controversial physical signs. These illnesses are “contested” because conflicting views exist between and among physicians and patients about their nature, causes, and treatment. Because of this, says Michael Murphy, M.D., Ph.D., co-author of “*Electronic Support Groups: An Open Line of Communication in Contested Illnesses,*” communication with patients with functional somatic syndromes (contested illnesses) often breaks down, impeding optimal treatment.

The article, published in *Psychosomatics*, the Journal of the Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, notes that many patients with contested illnesses instead turn to electronic support groups (ESGs) to communicate with other patients and talk about their experiences in bringing their illnesses to the medical system. It further examines the online communities for functional somatic syndromes and interprets the results through the theoretical framework of contested illnesses.

“It is important for physicians to listen to what is being said in ESGs because patients use them to create shared models of disease, which may lead to a breakdown of the physician-patient relationship,” says Dr. Murphy, staff psychiatrist at McLean Hospital, Belmont, Massachusetts. Indeed, many ESG members report interacting with physicians who seem to deny the meaning, treatability, and even the reality of their suffering.

Psychiatry and psychiatrists are especially scorned in ESGs. “Not only do psychiatrists represent the most direct challenge to patients’ views of etiology and treatment,” says Dr. Murphy, “but patients also argue that psychiatry is used to relegate contested illness to the realm of psychiatric illness.”

Noting that physicians can acknowledge more explicitly that there are limitations to medical knowledge and there is value in embodied experience, the authors urge doctors to be better listeners. “The act of listening can be improved by greater attentiveness to the patient’s experiences and focusing on shared goals.”

Some flexibility around treatment is also appropriate, according to the authors. “Winning shared victories with patients with contested illnesses requires physicians to reevaluate the way we speak to patients,” says Dr. Murphy. “Patients with contested illness respond positively when they share the decision-making of medical choices.”

Ultimately, Dr. Murphy concludes, “Better understanding of our patients’ experiences is useful even with patients who do not have a contested illness. A healthy doctor-patient relationship goes toward the goals of promoting better outcomes for patients.”

The Academy of Psychosomatic Medicine, a professional society of more than 1,200 leading physicians, represents psychiatrists dedicated to the advancement of medical science, education, and health care for persons with co-morbid psychiatric and general medical conditions.

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