

Empathy in the afternoon

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Empathy – the power of understanding and imaginatively entering into another person's feelings.

Those attending the Clinical Effectiveness Unit conference on 28th September 1999 had the opportunity to appreciate some of the strengths of the 'Listening to Young People' project. The project was developed to tackle the issues for rural youth in access to sexual health care, building on local alliances and the views of young people to facilitate more appropriate and useful services.

At the conference we had just an hour to participate in the theatre in education presentation developed from those offered to local primary care teams in North Cornwall as a catalyst for thinking about their services for young people, and how they might be improved.

The project was designed primarily for use in the much more intimate setting of an individual practice, with all the practice team members contributing and the presentation being shaped in relation to their own everyday practice and procedures. Each practice then had the opportunity of further support from the project to implement changes in practice identified as desirable during and after the theatre piece.

The conference room became the stage for the representation of scenes in practice reception and clinical rooms. Professional actors played the roles of two young

women plucking up courage to approach the practice to find help with contraception and responding to the care they received. Volunteers from the audience took the roles of practice nurse and doctor.

The situation that unfolded was one that we all could recognise from our clinics. Although this was just a presentation at a conference, and the project had no sets, props or staging tricks, the reactions of the audience were very powerful. The facilitators introduced the context of the piece and at points 'froze' action to check out our reactions and identification with the processes of care we saw represented.

The conference to that point had concentrated on the theoretical basis of contraceptive practice. Suddenly we were all brought face-to-face with the crucial importance of caring and the qualities of humanity and empathy that are needed for good clinical practice.

Many of us at the conference will recall the way we felt about the issues explored, and our feelings about what we saw when we attempt to design services that are useful for young people.

As Linda Hughes explains, this project is underpinned by the work of a wider group of local partners, and is part of on-going work to improve provision of services for young people. I wish we could mobilise the energy, enthusiasm and resources to follow their lead in many other areas of the UK.