

# Rounds for Reflection (R4R): Enhancing the Physician-Patient Connection Through Storytelling

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## Setting and Problem

As modern medicine and medical education have become increasingly industrialized, constraints imposed by duty hour limits, quality metrics, the electronic health record, and protocol-driven care plans continue to encroach on the sacred space between physician and patient. Often, the humanity we share with the patients we serve is obscured by the tedium of process, and we feel the effects of detachment. Too often, our identities and experiences as *physicians* do not conform easily to check boxes or to set shifts, and we need to be reminded that it is acceptable to spill over the lines. Through storytelling and group reflection, physicians can gain perspective on the less measurable aspects of the profession, and reaffirm what a privilege it is to serve.

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## Intervention

Since 2012, faculty members in the University of Pittsburgh internal medicine residency program have invited residents into their own living rooms for 3 to 4 evenings each year. During these sessions, termed Rounds for Reflection (R4R), we pour drinks, sit down, and share stories about patients and ourselves. Some stories are uplifting, some are frustrating, and some are heartbreaking. More than just the content, it is the process of sharing and of active listening that we find most cathartic and affirming.

Because the “hidden curriculum” of graduate medical training that leads to dehumanization and physician burnout is both structural and cultural, our

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TABLE

Resident Comments About Rounds for Reflection

| Concept                      | Comment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A safe place to reflect      | "I think reflecting is a necessity in our job, and will happen in some form or another. Better it be in a safe forum in which one can express uncertainty and vulnerability, as we are expected not to be those things in our workplace."                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                              | "I appreciated the opportunity to congregate with other physicians and reflect on how practicing medicine is changing me."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Combatting physician burnout | "I went to Rounds for Reflection looking for a place to process the daily grind of residency and patient care. It was a refreshing reminder that despite the burden and difficulty of practicing medicine it is still a great privilege."                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                              | "The time I went I was on MICU which was 1 of the most emotionally taxing rotations of the year. R4R acted as a therapeutic outlet. It was helpful to listen to many of my fellow residents express a lot of the concerns I struggled with and their approach. It was also just great to be in good company with some of the conversation actually breaking away from the topic of medicine that naturally tends to dominate our day-to-day exchanges." |
| Finding meaning in medicine  | "I loved having the opportunity to share the stories that have inspired me over the last year, and reaffirm why I am thankful each day for the opportunity to be a physician. I am also thankful for the opportunity to share stories about my insecurities and doubt as a physician, because I gain comfort in hearing that my experiences are not unique."                                                                                            |
|                              | "Rounds for Reflection is a great way to escape the crazy hospital world and recollect my thoughts on why we do what we do."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

Abbreviations: MICU, medical intensive care unit; R4R, Rounds for Reflection.

intervention is designed to respond in kind. Whereas the clinical learning environment promotes a physical separation between physicians and patients, a hierarchical power dynamic, and strict time limits, R4R takes place in a shared and deeply personal space. It is entirely extracurricular, off-campus, and off-the-clock. Whereas the culture of the hospital arises from the use of medical jargon, an obsession with objectivity and the pretense of certainty, R4R promotes a more humane dialogue that values subjectivity and leaves room for ambivalence, nuance, and mystery.

The novelty of R4R lies not in the concept itself, for generations of physicians have derived comfort and inspiration from discussing their shared experiences. But as the landscape of graduate medical education becomes increasingly crowded and compartmentalized, a forum that seeks to address broader questions related to our humanity, identity, and purpose can seem both radical and refreshing. Indeed, persuading residents to devote time and attention to the human side of medicine has never been more challenging—or more necessary.

R4R costs virtually nothing but a willingness to engage with residents and peers on a more personal level than is customary within the confines of the hospital. Invitations are managed through a free Evite account, and a brief synopsis of each discussion is posted on 1 of the faculty member's websites ([www.wardstories.org/r4r](http://www.wardstories.org/r4r)).

## Outcomes to Date

To date, 65 residents (roughly 20% of those invited) and 14 faculty members have attended at least 1 gathering, and many have become regular attendees. R4R welcomes guests with new perspectives and residents from other specialties, such as pediatrics and neurology, medical students, and 1 of our faculty member's fathers, who is a retired physician, have all attended. General themes from narrative feedback on annual, year-end surveys include an appreciation for a forum where it is safe to express uncertainty and vulnerability, and a sense that the exercise is both protective against physician burnout and inspiring for trainees. Selected narrative comments from residents are included in the TABLE.

The impact of R4R extends beyond the participants. Since its inception 3 years ago, R4R has featured prominently in our recruitment presentations, and many candidates highlight this as a unique strength of our residency. That such a program exists sends an important message about the culture at our institution and the humanistic values we hope to cultivate in our trainees.

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