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Identifying the Barriers to Optimal Healing in Primary Care

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Background: The current method of reimbursement for physician services encourages a focus on the procedural and technical aspect of medicine and discourages development of skills necessary to provide truly patient-centered care. These emphases on prescriptive services coupled with increased patient loads and diminished resources have left many primary care providers exhausted and dispirited. Beleaguered clinicians are unlikely to cultivate effective healing relationships with patients. In order to restore healing to healthcare clinicians will need to reconnect with patients and their passion for the art of medicine. This study attempts to elucidate the barriers to more effective healing from the perspectives of both patients and providers.

Methods: Focus groups were conducted with Group Health Cooperative Physicians (MDs), Registered Nurses (RNs), Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) and Medical Assistants (MAs) working in primary care clinics in Western Washington. and with patients who had utilized primary care. Focus groups lasted 2 hours and were conducted with 23 MDs, 44 nursing staff (RNs, LPNs, and MAs) and 28 patients. The proceedings were recorded and transcribed. The ethnographic software, ATLAS ti, is being used to analyze the data

Results: Preliminary results indicate that both patients and primary care team members have a broad view of healing that includes emotional, spiritual and physical aspects. Providers and patients view time as an important barrier to providing healing care and providers believe that major changes that have occurred in recent years have exacerbated their stress levels. Many providers noted that the inefficient functioning of primary care teams contributed to both patient and provider dissatisfaction. Finally, providers often commented that for meaningful change to occur, it is important to empower local teams to identify ways to improve the care they provide.

Conclusions: Primary care is in crisis and transformative changes will be necessary if primary care is to survive as a viable professional role and as the foundation of rational health care systems. This study elucidates the barriers that will need to be overcome if primary care providers are to reconnect with their original passions for medicine and healing and to be able to provide care that is truly healing.