

Philosophy & Paramedicine

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Philosophy?

Philosophy would seem a strange partner for Paramedicine, however medicine and nursing have extensively studied how philosophy underpins their practice. Health and philosophy have been intertwined since the time of Hippocrates. (Marcum, 2017) As Paramedicine advances as a profession we need to consider the philosophical basis of our practice to understand who we are, why we practice like we do, and the paramedic worldview and metaparadigm.



Dissecting Paramedic "Truisms"

Paramedic truisms are everywhere. A classic is "patients with a wet chest and a fever have pneumonia and patients with a wet chest and no fever have pulmonary oedema." Many paramedics anchor their treatment on such truisms as Justifiable True Beliefs (JTBs) - a traditional way of defining "knowledge". Such paramedics may have encountered patients with fever and a congested chest that were, in fact, diagnosed with pneumonia, making the statement both "true" and "justifiable". This could be an example of a "Gettier Problem", where a JTB may be accidentally true and thus seen as "knowledge" (Hetherington, 2001). But if you consider a patient with cold sepsis would meet the "definition" of pulmonary oedema, then the belief would not be true, and this separates the JTB from true knowledge. JTBs highlight the importance of evidence-based medicine, not only to improve outcomes but to morally ensure patients are treated with rigorously obtained knowledge and not potentially inaccurate beliefs.



Identity

Philosophically, identity is a relationship that a subject has to itself. The ancient Greeks believed everything had an "essence" which defined it as unique. Modern existential thinkers such as Sartre consider identity more complex and dynamic. For Sartre, our existence precedes our essence. That is, we form our identity through a complex series of life events where we transcend the facts of our existence (our "facticity") by interacting with our world (our "situation") thus building identity (Crowell, 2017). For Heidegger, our identity is part of the essence of our being, our "Dasein" (being-there). Our identity is the expression of our Dasein to the external world (Heidegger, 2010). In more concrete terms, our identity as paramedics is a constantly evolving self-referential experience which is not static and is not tied to any one element (e.g. an ambulance or an employer), although such elements in our facticity can impact on the way we self-reference.



References

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Person-Centred Care

Person-centred care is more than just a buzzword. It is grounded in medical humanism which arose in the 1960's but is also contextualised against the concept of medical dominance. Foucault describes medicalisation in terms of the "Clinical Gaze", that is a worldview where clinicians see patients as a pathological phenomenon and others argue how a structural-functionalist view of medicine robs patients of autonomy and disempowers them (Lupton, 1997). Person-centred care also requires paramedics to consider their power relationship with patients. Nussbaum (1995) argues that the denial of self-autonomy is a form of objectification and it could be argued some paramedics do this as a form of medicalisation. Equally, complete patient autonomy can be disempowering as they lack the capacity to make all health decisions so finding an ethical balance which respects self-determination is important for paramedics (Lupton, 1997).

The Paramedic Worldview

For centuries philosophers have wondered about the world and how we perceive it. Heidegger (2010) suggested that the act of "being" was a constantly dynamic and self-referential activity. Reality was a constant series of phenomena which the subject interpreted based on influences around them. A paramedic's worldview is their interpretation of their perceptions and is influenced by each new experience. Patients and others paramedics encounter invariably have, to some degree, a different worldview. This can help explain traditional disharmonies between clinicians and patients such as perceptions of appropriate ambulance usage. Worldview can also influence paramedic wellness. Dissonance between the paramedic's perception of their role in the world and actual experiences can impact on sense of purpose and burnout.



Conclusion

Philosophy is not something many paramedics think about. It is important that paramedic practice, and paramedic thought, is grounded in an ongoing discourse around the what defines the profession and its unique role in healthcare and the world. Paramedicine requires underpinning theories of its practice differentiating it from other healthcare approaches. Medicine, nursing and other health professions all have various philosophies of practice (e.g. the Nursing Metaparadigm). Establishing the way paramedics interrogate knowledge, and the world they exist in, is an important element of a maturing profession.

Science is
what you
know,
philosophy
is what you
don't know.

-Bertrand Russell

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