

# Medical Undergraduates' Perceptions on Medical Humanities Course in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Medical humanities is taught in medical schools in the western countries, partly to address the lack of compassion within healthcare. It seeks to develop understanding of human experiences relating to disease, disability and death, through humanities, arts and social sciences. In 2018, Patan Academy of Health Sciences Nepal introduced an eight-week medical humanities course for new medical students. This study aims to evaluate the course from the student participants' view, exploring their perceptions and experiences.

**Methods:** A mixed method study was used to assess the perceptions of 65 students who completed a semi-structured survey, comprising eight items, with five point- Likert scale and three open response questions. Quantitative data was analysed with results expressed as mean, standard deviation and percentage. Qualitative data was coded and analysed thematically.

**Results:** The students' perception of the course was strongly positive where 98.5% agreed or strongly agreed it was enjoyable and interesting (items 1,2) and should be continued (item 9). 97% agreed or strongly agreed it made them think differently (item 5) and 96.9% that it was relevant to future careers (item 6). 96.9% agreed or strongly agreed the course helped them understand doctor's caring roles (item 10) and 92.3% believed it will make them better doctors (item 11). Three themes emerged from open response questions related to perceptions- enjoyable and interesting, positive personal impact and valuable and important.

**Conclusions:** The students had positive perceptions of the medical humanities course, recognizing its' impact, importance and its value in medical education. Its expansion in the undergraduate curriculum should be considered.

**Keywords:** Evaluation;medical humanities; Nepal; perceptions;students

## INTRODUCTION

Medicine is a 'caring profession'. However, literature describes compassion to be lacking in healthcare.<sup>1</sup> Patients' wish to consult compassionate, empathetic doctors, but rarely do.<sup>1</sup> Medical education seems to contribute, with compassion declining during training.<sup>2,3</sup> In response, western medical schools incorporated Medical Humanities (MH) in the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> MH explores the human experience utilising; arts, literature and film. MH is likely to produce more compassionate and empathetic doctors through self reflection<sup>5,6</sup> although evidence is lacking.<sup>7</sup> Patients view MH positively.<sup>8</sup> MH is new in Asia.<sup>9</sup> Two Nepali studies show positive student responses to voluntary courses.<sup>9,10</sup> However, no evidence exists of core MH courses in Nepal.

Patan Academy of Health Sciences (PAHS) Medical

school aims to train "caring and socially responsible physicians, who believe in compassion, love, respect".<sup>11</sup> With the purpose of developing students' understanding of illness, disability, and dying, PAHS introduced 16 hours MH course within eight weeks foundation block in 2018. PAHS' MH course covers diverse topics including; disability, social injustice, old age, doctor-patient relationship, compassion and dying. Various media were utilised from art and photography to literature, poetry and film. Active learning was promoted through small group activities of discussion, poster design, class presentations and drama. Students also participated in a disability exposure exercise. Undertaking the roles of physically disabled people and carers, students visited local areas. Afterwards they reflected on the experience. On conclusion of the course, students created both individual written reflections and group dramatic presentations outlining their experiences.

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This study is an evaluation of the MH course, exploring perceptions and experiences of participants to establish its usefulness and facilitate improvement.

## METHODS

This study employs mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative in an evaluation study. Ethical approval was obtained from PAHS' Institutional Review Committee (IRC). All medical students in the 2019 batch were invited to participate.

A semi-structured survey was created to elicit students' perceptions, experiences and feedback. The survey tool contained eight statement items related to student perceptions and three open response questions. Respondents were asked to score their level of agreement with statements using a five-point Likert scale (1- Strongly disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neither agree nor disagree, 4- Agree, 5- Strongly agree). The survey was piloted with 65 students in the 2018 cohort and had good face validity and reliability, with Cronbach's alpha calculated as 0.74. On conclusion of the 2019 course, all 65 students were invited to complete the paper survey.

Participation in the survey was voluntary, students were free to decline. Surveys were completed anonymously, with students encouraged to give honest responses. All respondent surveys were allocated a code letter R and number, used in data analysis and reporting. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Version 20.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). The results were expressed as mean, standard deviation and percentages. Qualitative data was coded and analysed thematically using an iterative approach, subthemes related to perceptions were grouped into overarching themes.

## RESULTS

All 65 (100%) students in 2019 cohort completed the survey. Each participant answered every item. Cronbach's alpha calculated for all 11 items was 0.779, indicating good reliability of the survey tool.

Overall results show students scored all statements strongly positively, a mean score above 4.0 for each. Results for each statement item are seen in table 1.

98.5% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the MH course was both enjoyable and interesting (items 1,2) and the course should be included in future (item 9). 97% agreed or strongly agreed that materials made them think differently (item 5) and 96.9% that it was relevant to their future career (item 6). 96.9% agreed or strongly agreed that MH helped them understand doctor's role in caring for patients (item 10) and 92.3% that it will help them be better doctors (item 11).

Thematic analysis resulted in 3 overarching themes; Enjoyable and Interesting, Positive Personal Impact, Valuable and important.

Theme 1: Enjoyable and Interesting:

Almost all participants described MH as enjoyable or interesting.

*"I enjoyed the course a lot". R39*

*"medical humanities is interesting subject" R8*

Many students highlighted various active learning elements as interesting and enjoyable.

*"incorporating a fun activity with learning something useful was a great experience" R18*

Several students mentioned enjoying the diverse learning media employed.

*"MH course itself is very beneficial to medical students. The way of learning is different in good way which has made us learn with fun because contents are explained in the form of film, poem, biography, literature etc." R65*

*"Overall I found the MH course interesting interacting, effective for our future career. Way of teaching through poem, movie and those project work all were so effective and interesting." R57*

Theme 2: Positive Personal Impact

Students described various ways in which they had been positively impacted by MH. These results are grouped under subthemes: emotional impact, empathy, communication skills, changed views, become good doctor.

Emotional Impact

Many students described the emotional impact of MH. Several reported feeling sad or crying, others anger or love, in response to materials.

*".. In the MH course there are lots of story and poem related to the sad, heart touching and emotion. By reading these brings tears in my eye. MH support to deal with emotion." R39*

*"Everything that we did in MH course was good for us, to provoke the feeling of love, kindness, humanity..." R35*

Many identified real-life stories as particularly powerful and emotionally impacting. One remarked such stories were inspiring and motivating.

*"the emotions in stories and poems... It made me emotional and a better human being. It also encouraged me to be a good doctor in future."* R45

#### Empathy

A number of students commented on understanding and sharing others' feelings through MH.

*"MH course is very important for the medical students as they help us to understand the feeling of unwell.... and how to treat patients"* R16

Several described this as experiencing empathy.

*"... It somehow fostered the feeling of empathy in me towards the feelings of the sufferers and relatives. It gave me a lifetime motive to work "not only to cure patients but to heal them".* R25

Many participants highlighted the disability exposure exercise as developing empathy.

*"I think our project work to be a disabled was the most effective one because we could experience and feel the misery of the disabled. To observe the reality this project helped us a lot. We could understand how difficult life they are leading which gives us more inspiration and courage."* R50

*"When I acted as a caretaker for disabled person. It was something I had never imagined that I could experience in my monotonous life. It really helped me to view from a new perspective. I could feel their devotion and pain even though it was just for a short period of time"* R9.

#### Communication and Communication Skills

Interestingly several students identified MH as positively impacting their communication skills. A few, describing themselves as shy or introverted, found interactive course elements helpful.

*"group works and group discussions. It helps me participate myself in different creative works....I became able to express myself, speaks in front of mass with confidence".* R6

*"the course generate positive response how to listen to other view and present own view in proper or effective ways."* R12

Several highlighted additional benefits of small group work, fostering peer relationships. They described developing rapport during discussions.

*"group work. Initially it helped me to gel and interact with the class. Also as many people worked on same topics it helped bring out new ideas"* R23.

#### Changed Views

Many students described their views or attitudes being challenged and positively changed through MH. Several commented on changed attitudes towards disabled; others, a different perspective on the value of human life and death.

*"This was an interesting course which helped me think and value human life more especially in terminal and disabled patient."* R23

*"the emotions present in every stories, poem. It really made me change perception of looking at things. It made me a better human being."* R44

One participant, recognizing the impact of compassion in healthcare, described changing motivation for studying medicine.

*"I wanted to be a doctor for money and fame, but this course changed my perception. I've realised what a doctor mean for needy patients. I realised what caring and kindness is. What humanity signifies. Which surely will be my own responsibility one day"* R14

#### Become a Good Doctor

Many respondents expressed belief that MH would make them a better human and good doctor.

*"I feel blessed to be able to read this.... It made me on the path to become a good doctor for future. In many steps it has changed my view."* R54

Several participants identified the real-life materials as inspiring them to become a good doctor.

*"... treating patient as a whole person.. not as an object is best part of this course for me. Because it really developed a character of more behaviour..... It may also help me to be good doctor."* R49

A few, however, doubted the long-term impact of MH. One remarked that any emotional impact was short lived.

*"..We can't teach humanity to anyone after studying*

*these story, we just feel empathetic and sad for just 2 hour. Then after while we forget.” R20.*

Theme 3: Value/Importance

The majority of respondents felt that MH was important and valuable.

*“MH course is very important for the medical students as they help us to understand the feeling of unwell.....*

*and how to treat patients” R16*

Many students expressed the view that MH should be continued or expanded in future.

*“this ...is very important for medical career.... helps students to expand and improve their perception and views. Also helps us to understand a doctors’ significant role in caring.....should be mandatory and continued in every batches of medical school” R13.*

Table 1. Results of Survey.

Items	Mean±SD	Str. Disagree / Disagree -1,2 (%)	Neutral -3 (%)	Agree -4 (%)	Strongly agree-5 (%)
1 - I found the medical humanities course interesting.	4.63±0.52	0	1.5	33.8	64.6
2 - I enjoyed the medical humanities course.	4.66±0.51	0	1.5	30.8	67.7
3 - The sessions were well structured.	4.00±0.64	1.5	15.4	64.6	18.5
4 - The sessions were interactive and included much discussion time.	4.57±0.53	0	1.5	40.0	58.5
5- I found the materials we used in the sessions (poems, books, film, art) made me think differently about disease, disability and death	4.68±0.53	0	3.1	26.2	70.8
6- The subjects discussed were relevant to my future medical career.	4.60±0.55	0	3.1	33.8	63.1
7-The course expanded my perspective and views (for example culturally, artistically and intellectually) through the material discussed.	4.29±0.68	0	12.3	46.2	41.5
8- The course faculty were engaging and helped to stimulate ideas and discussions.	4.25±0.73	1.5	12.3	46.2	40
9 - I think the medical humanities course was important and should be included in future introductory courses.	4.74±0.48	0	1.5	23.1	75.4
10- The medical humanities course helped me to better understand a doctor’s role in caring for patients.	4.58±0.56	0	3.1	35.4	61.5
11- Studying medical humanities will help make me a better doctor.	4.62±0.63	0	7.7	23.1	69.2

DISCUSSION

Our students’ perceptions of MH are positive. They enjoyed the course and found it interesting. Studies show that students’ perceptions and attitudes towards teaching are important, impacting their view of the subject material, their learning choices and subsequent learning outcomes.<sup>12-15</sup> Indeed, Entwistle et al.<sup>16</sup> suggest that students’ perceptions have more impact on learning than the teaching method. Hence, students’ enjoyment and interest are important indicators of a successful program. Research also demonstrates a connection between learners’ attitudes and perceptions and their

behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Students with positive perceptions are more likely to internalise their learning and act on it. Learners recognising the value of teaching influences whether they develop and implement it in their future practice.<sup>18,19</sup> Hence our students’ evaluation of MH, as interesting and enjoyable is both encouraging and significant.

Student participants perceived MH as relevant to their future role as doctors. Literature identifies the importance of teaching being relevant. Learners develop skills quicker when teaching is applicable and relevant to real-life.<sup>20</sup> Students identified a number of areas of positive personal impact from MH, including changing

their views and perceptions. They describe the emotional impact of materials and their subsequent development of empathy towards patients and relatives. Whilst these findings constitute participants' subjective views, they do concur with several studies showing increased medical student empathy following humanities teaching.<sup>21,22</sup> Indeed, a recent systematic review<sup>23</sup> concluded that educational interventions can successfully support and enhance empathy in medical students. A study looking at empathy in medical students<sup>24</sup> found that students from Nepali medical schools scored lower than those from developed countries but similar to those from other Asian medical schools. Against this background of low levels of student empathy, our results are encouraging.

Students strongly supported the continuation of MH with many proposing its' extension to other years, demonstrating their belief in its' value and importance. Significantly many students believed MH was valuable in helping them become good doctors.

Students identified active learning features as effective and enjoyable, highlighting benefits of enhancing communication skills. Literature demonstrates that active learning is more effective than passive learning<sup>25</sup> and is achieved via a high level of student engagement<sup>26</sup> with students as "*active agents of their own learning*".<sup>27</sup>

Our findings of students' enjoyment and positive perceptions of MH agree with those of two Nepali studies on optional extracurricular MH courses.<sup>9,10</sup> Our study results demonstrated positive student perceptions to compulsory MH in the Nepal context.

Further study is required to see whether students' perceptions of increased empathy leads to a change in their attitudes and practice and whether this persists during their later career.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our study shows students perceive Medical Humanities course as a relevant, interactive, enjoyable, valuable and important part of medical education. The majority believed it would help them become good doctors, changing their views or perceptions and developing empathy and compassion. Considering the worldwide background of reducing compassion and empathy in healthcare these results are both important and encouraging. MHs' wider introduction and further evaluation across the undergraduate curriculum in medical schools of Nepal.

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