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Medical graffiti on hospital walls: an innovative ethical vision in health care

_Narrative

In 2009 some doctors and nurses of two medical units of San Giovanni Bosco General Hospital in Turin asked the artistic director of Palazzo Bricherasio Foundation for fine arts in order to provide corridors and wards walls with some artistic decorations.

The easiest intervention to do would have resulted in simply hanging a number of reproductions of paintings or of nice posters of past exhibitions of the Foundation, with the final effect of putting some shapes and colours onto the white shadow of the walls. But from the beginning the whole staff considered this proposal only a banal use of the endless and anonymous corridors and passage ways, which would have minimized the feelings of hope and fear often experienced by patients and visitors: an external enrichment made of unfitted impersonal objects with no relation to the inner intensity of those places.

On the contrary, hospital walls have an intrinsic potential capability of communication which should be eventually grasped. So suddenly came out the idea of using walls as a natural blackboard to communicate what usually remains hidden and unspoken: thoughts and words of doctors and nurses. A to our greatest surprise, they have much to say, as anybody else has, even if their need to freely express themselves has remained unrecognised so far. Medical staff must look professional, doctors are expected to keep distance, to behave in an objective and impersonal way, emotionally indifferent to patients' suffering. Nobody knows what is inside doctors' hearts, what emotions and feelings do move them, what fears and expectations they have.

Why do they have to keep so silent? Perhaps this neutral behaviour is the best adjustment to the scientific and technological feature of contemporary medicine: being as emotionless as possible, only skilled in handling complex technologies and medical devices, according to standardised procedures and guidelines, with no visible contact with suffering and anxiety. There is no public and explicit evidence of doctors and nurses discomfort and uneasiness, in spite of the international findings of many inquiries about the burnout risk in health profession (high percentage of suicides, especially among female doctors, drug and alcohol abuse). Figures say nothing about deep emotions, but anyway they persist under the subtle cover of self control and professional dignity. Emotions and feelings, even if unspoken, affect the quality of care and the inner experience of the professional caregivers. The best evidence for this need has been the immediate and spontaneous attendance to the project *Medical Graffiti* at San Gio-

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vanni Bosco hospital by all the staff, none excluded. To focus on the outcome of the intervention, a number of meetings have been carried out with all the staff, and the discussion finally resulted in the common decision of clearly expressing doctors and nurses' statements with no restriction, by means of writing in a graffiti style onto the walls of the work place. This bottom up decision has been the revival of one of the most well known and long lasting traditions in human history: from the ancient engravings on Lascaux rocks through the most recent writings on urban walls, the act of engraving a permanent sign, either undersigned by authors or not, has always enabled to uncover the true essence of human beings, which can actually affect others' mind and behaviour. Developing the whole project has involved doctors and nurses in a very positive interaction, enabling them to share both their emotional insight and the usual rites of daily activities. At the end of this insight process, through passionate discussions, everybody has got to speak up and give birth to his own subjective truth, the one deeply hidden inside, replacing for a moment the required scientific objectivity.

Everybody has been required to express his own emotion, belief or statement in only one single sentence: all of them have been collected and finally scrutinized by the whole team. The sentences which sounded particularly representative of the philosophy and spirit of the whole team have been chosen to be written down onto walls of the two units. So everyone has been at the same time an author and a reader, acting both as an individual and as a part of the team. Actually, the chosen sentences are quite clear and simple statements, but they add a creative and poetic touch to everyday work activities. They exceed the usual linguistic patterns of guidelines and scientific protocols, showing the urgency of breaking the repetition of the ordinary style. Beyond their poetic appearance, the statements reveal underneath the ethical values of each author as well as the ones of the team. Every sentence being undersigned, this implicitly engages every author to behave according to the content of it, and to keep consistent with it in the future.

Since the aim of the project was providing walls of corridors and wards of the units with an artistic decorations, they have been turned into a genuine *Medical graffiti* permanent exhibition: in fact, the chosen sentences have been written onto the walls by means of the application of simple graphic stickers, all along a continuous line in order to underline the equal importance of everyone's speech, deliberately avoiding any hierarchy among the different professional roles and

work positions of the writers. Stickers with clear colours and tidy writing signs have been preferred so to give a harmonious, esthetical shape to the true emotions springing out of the walls. To respect the truth and the essence of every author, a great accuracy in graphic translation of each sentence has been considered a basic requirement. Stickers seemed to be better than any other permanent form of writing because they can be easily removed from the wall anytime one of the authors would consider his own statement no longer consistent and appropriate with his feelings and thoughts in the future. Turning the physical space of a health care unit into a public exhibition of beliefs, feelings and emotions of the staff, what does it stand for? As a matter of fact, nobody could foresee at the very beginning of this experiment neither the intrinsic meaning nor the ethical values implied. This has been more the result of a spontaneous wish rather than an intellectual achievement.

The project *Medical Graffiti* at San Giovanni Bosco Hospital has been the first experiment for giving right to speak to doctors and nurses, since they need to utter and show their own feelings, sharing with others – patients, visitors, colleagues – fears, hopes, expectations. Aiming to uncover their personal truth and ethical values, the linguistic framework has changed as well, shifting from the technical language to more poetic expressions. Doctors and nurse have been able to go beyond the ordinary boundary which splits in two their professional role and their deep humanity. The burden that technology has put over health professions is probably getting too heavy and more and more intolerable. That's why health professionals intend to break the cryptic technical language which they are restricted in and to utter high and clear what their values and feelings actually are.

Western culture, characterized by strong individualism and subjectivity, drives people to hide their deepest need of communication. Nevertheless, this need remains, even among the health staff. We should take care of emotions and feelings, whosever they belong to. These last years a great attention has been paid to psychological and emotional needs of patients and relatives, collecting their narratives in many different ways, while doctors and nurses have remained completely isolated and constrained in their stiff role playing. The experience of *Medical Graffiti* at the hospital shows how slippery is the boundary of the so called medical humanities within the health care practice. When we first got to the hospital we were only concerned about a decorative intervention, but after a little while we have been surprised by the will of the staff to upset the quite banal solution we firstly proposed to them. We experienced a particularly spontaneous, personal and intimate reaction: all the staff, doctors in particular, challenged conventional issues and asked for playing with their creative hidden parts. Unexpectedly they decided to express openly their thoughts and remarks and in all their sentences there was plenty of pathos, of lyric, and of imagination. The final decision of making them public, editing them as *Medical Graffiti*, has completely satisfied both single authors and staff. Everybody's opinion and equality, with no ranking among professional roles, have been protected by the final choice of the best

sentences within the team, regardless of the hierarchical position of the authors, and by writing them along a symbolical continuous line. This symbolically emphasized that there is no difference in healthcare among the professions involved: all of them are equally important in the aim of healing, all of them are rich in human qualities. Walls decorated with *Medical Graffiti* shed light not on cognitive and technical skills, but on the deepest roots of humanity ever present in healthcare, standing as a sample of a totally new «medical library».

In the following months the outcome of the experiment has been assessed through one hundred questionnaires administered to patients and visitors of the units, obtaining all favourable comments to *Medical Graffiti*. Against all odds, patients love to know what their caregivers feel and think, discovering that they too are human beings, passionate and sensitive, and not only good medical machines good for reading through their bodies but completely neglecting their souls. Reading the sentences on the walls expands patients' opportunity to share a sort of social and cultural network based on qualified opinions, feelings and explicit values, which concern their own health and which show the great variety of offer of possible healing processes. Through simple statements, *Medical Graffiti* can reinforce mutual trust between caregivers and patients, getting them to know better each other, and therefore empowering them to take more informed decisions. From now on every patient will be always able to verify if the behaviour of his caregiver is consistent with the statement undersigned on the wall. Moreover at any time patients will be reassured to receive the invaluable help springing out of the contact between two human beings in search of their mutual truth.

The project *Medical Graffiti*, though limited in time and extent, seems to be an innovative form of communication, quite satisfactory both for staff and patients. We have managed to pull off the trick on focusing on priorities, working closely and effectively with the authors, keeping in mind every moment the ethical importance of handling everyone's truth. Dealing with personal inner truth demands greatest care and respect: that's why the graphics of writings has been provided with such an accurate formal shape, since ethical values always deserve proper esthetical qualities. Nurturing with good words in a good shape both minds and hearts of patients and carers has been one of the most important side effects of this special communication.

The successful outcome of this first experience fosters a new medical evolution, in order to empower health professionals with more advanced emotional skills so to cope with patients' psychological and spiritual needs.

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