

MOVIES IN EDUCATION OF PSYCHIATRY RESIDENTS

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SUMMARY

Movies are a complex entity representing simultaneously an art form, a powerful industry, and a social phenomenon. The movie industry has always shown keen interest in physicians and medicine in general, and psychiatry in particular has often been in the spotlight. While there can be positive aspects of interaction of the movies and the psychiatry, stigmatization and negative public perception are also the results we often have to consider. Movies exploit psychiatric topics, at the same time portrayal of mental conditions, psychiatrists, and psychiatry on big screen could be used in different kinds of education in psychiatry. We present our initial experience with introducing movies in education of psychiatry residents in Psychiatric Hospital Vrapče.

Key words: psychiatry education – movies - resident training - cinema

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INTRODUCTION

Movies are a complex entity representing simultaneously an art form, a powerful industry, and a social phenomenon. The movie industry has always shown keen interest in physicians and medicine in general and psychiatry in particular has often been in the spotlight. Movies with different psychiatric and psychiatry-related topics tend to be among the most watched ones. Some of these movies feature problems of psychiatry and mental health professionals themselves and/or portray individuals with mental disorders as main characters, whether they are genuine psychiatric patients or just showing certain mental health-related issues. Many of these movies are so successful that general public comes to identify psychiatry through them and forms attitude towards psychiatry, patients and their treatment based on what they see in the movies (Pirkis 2006, Damjanovic et al. 2009). Those attitudes and perception can therefore be formed on deeply flawed presentations of mental disorders, patients and psychiatry. Representations of psychiatry and psychiatrists varied over time from sheer veneration to complete disregard and demonization (Schneider 1977), and psychiatric patients themselves were portrayed as being potentially everything from enlightened individuals to homicidal maniacs and "zoo specimens" (Hylar et al. 1991).

In answering why psychiatry has been and still is so interesting to filmmakers it was stated many times over that filmmakers in essence strive towards achieving artistic presentation of profound inner struggles and emotional turmoil and, exactly because films use such complex inner motivations and heightened emotions in order to tell stories, parallels and inspiration are often found in psychiatric topics (Gabbard & Gabbard 1999, Schneider 1987). In 1920s producer Samuel Goldwyn wanted to exploit then popular association between psychoanalysis and sex and even offered \$100,000 consulting fee to Freud in an unsuccessful attempt to get

his help in making a love movie (Shortland 1987). However, relationship between movies and psychiatry is more complex and its different aspects can possibly be used to mutual benefit, while movies exploit psychiatric topics, portrayal of mental conditions, psychiatrists and psychiatry on big screen could be used in different kinds of education in psychiatry (Bhugra 2003).

In educating psychiatry residents all available methods should be used to make sure residents gain knowledge and skills needed for them to become competent psychiatrists. In addition to classical methods of education (lectures, seminars, workshops, supervisions) other means and methods of education are introduced including multimedia. Provoked by the fact that psychiatry and those suffering from mental disorders are often portrayed in movies (Pirkis 2006, Rosen 1997) we asked ourselves if those same movies could be used in education of psychiatry residents. Believing that it was not only possible but useful to educate psychiatry residents in such a manner, we started this practice in Psychiatric hospital "Vrapče". This method of resident education is for now only an experiment, but an experiment that might result in introduction of this method as a main-stream educational tool¹. Decision to use movies in education was in part result of the realization that general public, but psychiatry residents as well, build opinions on some psychiatric topics and create strong beliefs, based on what they see in movies. Those beliefs can be flawed, often producing negative perception of psychiatry, psychiatric institutions, and psychiatric patients (Pirkis 2006, Gabbard & Gabbard 1999, Damjanovic et al. 2009). It is hard not to be under the impression that the general public considers psychiatry, as portrayed in

¹ One of the reasons to start this form of education was renovation and opening of The Educational Center of Psychiatric Hospital Vrapče with a modern auditorium appropriate for movie projections. The same auditorium was used as early as 1932 for weekly movie projections for patients and employees of the hospital.

some of the movies, to be a profession abusing its power in order to harm "innocent people", and consequentially see psychiatric institutions as places where this "crime" takes place. Alternatively, some are prone to viewing psychiatry unrealistically as the "psychoanalytical couch" on which all of the every-day problems are solved through simplified formulas presented in a naive fashion in movies.

Starting from those observations, but also from the fact that movies were already mentioned many times in the context of different forms of education in medicine and psychiatry (Akram 2009, Datta 2009, Alexander 2005, Masters 2005), a small group of residents was initially consulted on the appropriate way to approach this potential educational method. After all consulted residents expressed their interest and willingness to participate, psychiatry residents in Croatia were invited by e-mail to the first panel discussion entitled "Movies and psychiatry". Invitation to the residents stated the main reasons for introducing this method of education in psychiatry, it highlighted negative effects that can come as result of flawed portrayals of mental disorders, patients, and psychiatry in movies and stressed the need for raising awareness of the impact of such movies. On the other hand, it was also recognized there are some movies that present psychiatric issues and pathology in such a realistic way that they could and indeed should be used as educational tools.

Educational forum "Movies and psychiatry" for psychiatry residents was planned to take on a form of monthly panel discussions, featuring projection of a selected movie and a semi-structured discussion following the projection. The discussions are moderated by invited commentators, a movie critic and a psychiatrist, who are expected to offer short opening observations (5-10 minutes) after the projection. All participants (residents, psychiatrists, psychologists, students) are invited to join in the general discussion. At the end of the discussion moderators, movie critic and psychiatrist, are expected to comment on all the issues raised during the discussion, try formulating possible conclusions, and point out the still unanswered questions.

FIRST EXPERIENCES

Three movie projections followed by panel discussions took place so far, each on the first Tuesday in February, March and April 2010.

These are our impressions and observations:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest²: The first movie chosen for the "Movies and psychiatry" forum was *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (starring Jack Nicholson, Louise Fletcher). One of the reasons for

² *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, director Milos Forman (United Artists, 1975) After arrival at a mental institution, brash rebel Randle Patrick McMurphy (Nicholson) rallies patients together to confront the authority of the oppressive Nurse Ratched (Fletcher).

choosing exactly this movie as the first to be presented was its "notoriety". Our assumption that this popular and controversial movie would attract large audience proved correct (130 participants). One factor contributing to such an impressive attendance were also the names of the commentators chosen to moderate the panel discussion on offer their views on the movie³.

Observations made by the commentators (movie critic and psychiatrist), as well as the general discussion that lasted for 2 hours (many participants insisted on the continuation of the discussion), were judged by attending residents to be interesting and educational⁴. After the attempt of the movie critic to view the movie simply as an artistic portrayal of rebellion against oppressive society in the 1960s (where psychiatry is used simply to symbolize that society and restrictive social norms, and the main character represents someone trying to break the bonds), psychiatrists even though respecting such views could not overlook the implied critic of the psychiatry itself, whether it be justified or exaggerated. Discussion focused on the general perception of the psychiatry provoked by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The movie was also used to highlight past and present problems of psychiatric services and treatment of patients; mistakes made by staff in psychiatric institutions were also analyzed. Psychiatry residents participated actively offering their views on portrayal of psychiatric topics in the movie and drew parallels to the every-day situations they face (over 90% of all psychiatry residents doing their residency programs in Zagreb were present). Residents were able to explore public perception of psychiatry created by such movie portrayals and to learn how to adequately challenge such perceptions, but also to recognize problems and errors in every-day work caused by attitudes, characters and inadequate education of the staff in mental health institutions as well as by the organization of psychiatry wards itself.

Special significance of first panel discussion was that it came to the conclusion that because of its controversial nature and the topic it shows *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* could be used in education of the entire medical staff of psychiatric hospital. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* has since been shown to all the medical staff in Psychiatric Hospital Vrapce.

A Beautiful Mind⁵: Projection of *A Beautiful Mind* (starring Russell Crowe and Jennifer Connelly) and the discussion that followed attracted 50 participants (25

³ Dražen Ilinčić, movie critic, and Professor Norman Sartorius, MD, PhD.

⁴ This movie projection and panel discussion sparked wider interest; it was treated as a cultural happening by the media. Croatian Television ran a seven-minute report in one of its most viewed culture programs. Daily papers also reported on this event.

⁵ *A Beautiful Mind*, director Ron Howard (Imagine Entertainment, 2001) The movie portrays struggle of famous mathematician John Forbes Nash Jr. (Russell Crowe) with schizophrenia and his life story culminating in receiving Nobel prize for economy.

residents, or 70% of all the residents invited). Commentators⁶, one from the cinematographic and the other from the psychiatric point of view, tried to accentuate problems and topics presented in the movie. A fruitful debate on possibilities of treatment, rehabilitation and achievements of patients suffering from schizophrenia was the result. Residents who once again showed significant interest in presented topic and its movie portrayal were left with many unanswered questions for later contemplation. Need for additional return to the same topics was recognized and highlighted. Few notable observations were made regarding the portrayal of the main character's visual hallucinations opening the wider general discussion on the hallucinations and their character⁷. Still, the most important thing is that the message was sent from the forum saying that schizophrenia patients "having a fighting chance", that their creativity can be substantial and must be recognized, and that with appropriate therapy and support from family members and social services all patients can lead a productive life and function adequately within society.

Mr. Jones⁸: Mr. Jones (starring Richard Gere and Lena Olin) was the movie chosen for the third panel discussion "Movie and Psychiatry". Number of participants attending the third forum was roughly the same as in the previous one, showing a stable interest of residents and other participants. Observations of the commentators⁹ and the discussion following the projection of the movie revolved roughly around three points - a) authenticity of the representation of bipolar disorder through the main character¹⁰ (discussion on the patient, his condition and therapeutic interventions shown in the movie resembled "case report discussion"), b) the problem of involuntary hospitalization of manic patients and c) therapist (psychiatrist)-patient relationship. Residents were further introduced to the

various clinical presentations of bipolar disorder and repercussions that disorder can have on social functioning of the patients. Residents themselves made important observations about the problem (ethical questions) of close (sexual) relationship and offered their views on possible ways to resolve such situations should they arise. Ethical dimensions of inappropriate therapist-patient contacts and the need to maintain professional boundaries were especially stressed.

What have the first panel discussions about movies and psychiatry shown us?

Although, based on previous consultations with residents, we predicted their interest in this type of education in psychiatry, we were surprised by their response and the active participation in discussions. In an atmosphere that could be best described as relaxed they were able to comment on complex psychiatric topics and to gain much needed knowledge in a simple way. Creativity and interest of the psychiatry residents was additionally shown by their numerous proposals regarding movies for future panel discussions.

CONCLUSION

Cinema is a powerful medium whose impact should not be taken lightly. Representation of psychiatry, psychiatrists and psychiatric patients varies but is often shaped by the pressures of commercial interest, resulting in possible negative depictions and stigma being attached to all the stakeholders. Even when just aiming at entertaining the public, movies are a valuable tool in understanding social context of the psychiatry, and should be critically observed in order to judge possible benefits or harm they could cause patients and mental health profession. Movies can be used in different ways in educating mental health professionals, they can be used to teach principles of doctor-patient interaction and psychopathology, to understand context in which psychiatry is functioning within society and other aspects of psychiatry practice. This method of education has been gaining popularity and more increasing acceptability.

The ongoing "experiment" in Psychiatric Hospital Vrapce of learning psychiatry through watching and commenting movies which portray psychiatry-and-psychopathology-related topics, shows that psychiatry residents accept this type of education above all expectations. Although modest, our experience shows that this type of education in resident training can be effective because knowledge of relevant psychiatric topics is received in a relaxed and productive atmosphere through watching movies and engaging in a discussion on what was just seen.

Considering how similar initiatives and attempts tend to experience "inflation" over time, it can be expected that this one will run out of steam as well, but in the meantime those who are involved in this type of education will certainly benefit.

⁶ Tomislav Kurelec, movie critic, and Professor Miro jakovljević, MD, PhD, psychiatrist, Head of the Psychiatric Clinic, Clinical Hospital Center Zagreb and Medical School University of Zagreb.

⁷ It is unclear whether it is ignorance or carelessness that the term "delusions" was translated in Croatian as "illusions". This also points to the problem in Croatian psychiatry of flawed translation of certain terms taken from Anglo-Saxon literature and more frequent indiscriminate use of adapted English words instead of already existing Croatian terms.

⁸ Mr. Jones, director Mike Figgis (TriStar Pictures, 1993.) Mr. Jones (Richard Gere) suffers from bipolar disorder, his mood varies from intense emotional wellbeing and optimism to suicidal depression. Libbie (Lena Olin) is a doctor in psychiatric hospital who becomes involved in her patient's case more than just professionally.

⁹ Nenad Polimac, movie critic, and Professor Vesna Medved, MD, PhD, psychiatrist, Clinical Hospital Center Zagreb and Medical School University of Zagreb.

¹⁰ MR. Polimac stated that the director, writer and the producer, prior to making the film, consulted literature extensively and visited a number of psychiatric institutions where they talked to those suffering from bipolar disorder in order to portray the problem as authentically as possible.

It will be interesting to see how "things" will proceed and develop, and maybe we will conclude few years from now that this form of education has become standard and common.

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