

# Engagement With 'Illness Narratives' On A Masters Module In Neurological Physiotherapy

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# Engagement With 'Illness Narratives' On A Masters Module In Neurological Physiotherapy



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## Introduction

'Illness narratives' are a means by which health care workers can explore the perspectives of people who experience illness or disability.

Clinicians regularly engage with clients in holistic assessment and negotiation of rehabilitation goals - tasks which require 'narrative competence', the ability to narrate and interpret the client's story (Charon 2001).

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to evaluate use of published 'illness narratives' in learning and teaching on a Masters module in neurological physiotherapy.

It aimed to survey the participation of Masters physiotherapy students and to explore their attitudes about the use of such 'illness narratives'.

## Methods

The evaluation of student attitudes to the 'illness narratives' book club was by means of pre- and post-module questionnaires, containing open- and closed-questions.

## Participants and Intervention

All participants were students on a Masters module in neurological physiotherapy. 10 out of 12 students were from countries outside the UK, including India, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The 'Illness Narratives' book club was a collection of published narratives, first person narratives, but also case studies narrated by an observer (e.g. Oliver Sacks, Jonathan Cole) or relatives (Andrea Gillies, Deborah Wearing).

Students were asked to take one book per week and to read highlighted sections or recommended chapters.

Students were given some time during the taught sessions to report back to colleagues (in small groups) on what interested them, and reasons to recommend the book.

At this stage students were not asked to do any writing themselves other than their module assignments.

This year, for the first time, the book club was introduced in week one by giving the academic background to the uses of narrative in medicine, especially the work of Rita Charon (e.g. Charon 2001, Soundy et al. 2014).

'learn the person's perceptions'

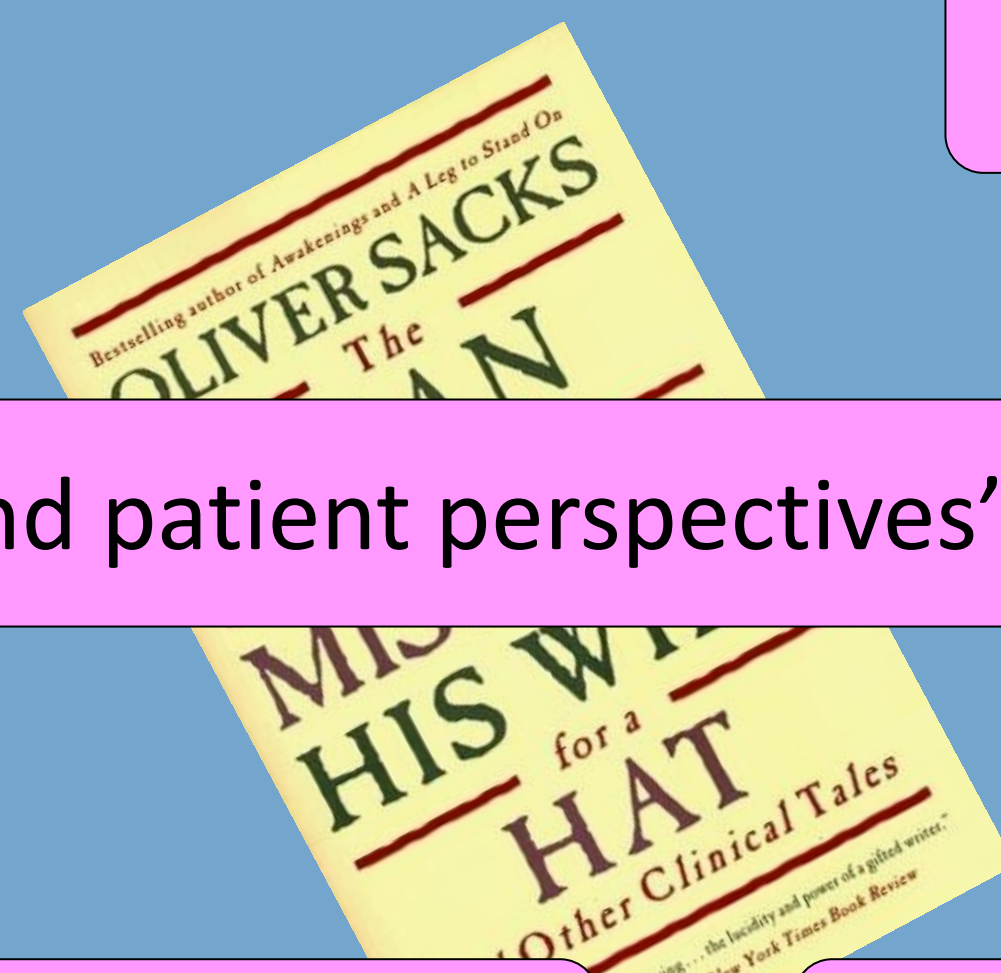
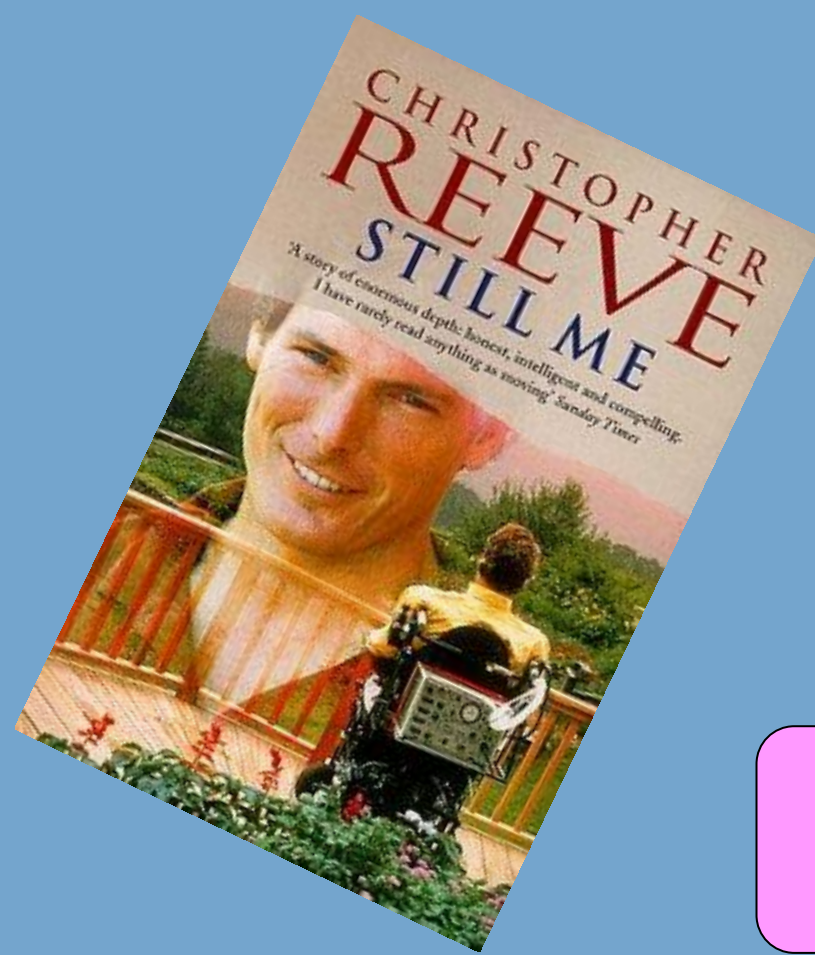
'how each individual handles the same problem differently'

'understand patient perspectives'

'insight to how families play a role'

'understand patient's feelings'

'opportunity to be in the shoes of the patient'



## Survey Results

12/12 students returned post-module questionnaires.

### Positive responses:

100% of responders indicated that reading 'illness narratives' was useful. Benefits of this type of reading identified by students were various, as seen above (boxes).

Most popular books were:

1. O.Sacks *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*
2. J-D Bauby *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*
3. R.McCrum *My Year Off: Rediscovering Life After a Stroke*

Students identified **lack of time** as the main barrier to benefit fully from this type of literature.

**Benefits of group discussions** identified by students:

- improved 'my narrative skills'
- facilitated 'better explorations of other stories'.

## Discussion and Conclusions

- 'Illness narratives' are a way to facilitate therapists' understanding of client perspectives and the emotional struggles often not visible outside the home.
- The pre-module questionnaire indicated that some students initially regarded 'illness narratives' as mainly a key to learning about a condition, and to improving diagnosis, but this changed as a result of the reading and discussion during the module.
- Masters students are willing to engage with this kind of literature, but presenting it as part of an academic discipline eliminated the small minority in previous years who did not engage.
- Directing students to particular chapters, incidents, and paragraphs was appreciated by students.

## References

- Charon, R (2001) Narrative Medicine: A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Trust *JAMA* 286 (15): 1897-1902
- Soundy A, Roskell C, Stubbs B, Collett J, Dawes H, Smith B (2014) Do you hear what your patient is telling you? Understanding the meaning behind the narrative *Way Ahead (MS Trust)* 18:2 10-13

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