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# Narrative medicine: Learning through stories

Christopher J. Degeling

*University of Wollongong*, [degeling@uow.edu.au](mailto:degeling@uow.edu.au)

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# Narrative medicine: Learning through stories

## **Abstract**

Animal owners typically speak as storytellers: they communicate concerns about their animals through a narrative. Chris Degeling argues that, rather than being a distraction, a better understanding of the nature of storytelling can help veterinarians build relationships that are both morally and clinically valuable.

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## Viewpoint

# Narrative medicine: learning through stories

Chris Degeling, 2012

### Author Affiliation:

Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, Sydney School of Public Health, K25 Level 1, Medical Foundation Building, 94-96 Parramatta Road, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

✉ [christopher.degeling@sydney.edu.au](mailto:christopher.degeling@sydney.edu.au)

Animal owners typically speak as storytellers: they communicate concerns about their animals through a narrative. I argue that, rather than being a distraction, a better understanding of the nature of storytelling can help veterinarians build relationships that are both morally and clinically valuable.

The past decade has seen the re-emergence in human medicine of a close concern for patient narratives – how people tell their stories in clinical contexts. This move to what has become known as narrative medicine is in part an attempt to reaffirm that there is more to the ‘art’ of healing than pills, tests and numbers. Narrative analysis has been applied to three related lines of medical inquiry. These can be loosely described as investigating: the role of narrative in clinical reasoning; narrative as a guide for clinical ethics; and narrative and the nature of patient identity (Greenhalgh and Hurwitz 1999). Acknowledging the obvious limitations of autobiography and storytelling as forms of evidence, how healthcare providers respond to the affective aspects of what their patients say during a consultation is of importance to patient outcomes – not just in terms of patient compliance, but also in terms of promoting interventions that are sympathetic to the way people choose to live their lives (Greenhalgh 1999).

The key insight is that people typically speak as storytellers (Hurwitz 2000). They communicate concerns about their health, or that of a family member, through a narrative that is constructed around a sequence of events that they find meaningful. Most companion animal veterinarians intuitively, if not deliberately, use some form of narrative analysis on a daily basis. Narrative analysis is a clinical skill that can be enhanced. Although veterinarians cannot ask their patients to describe what happened and how it feels, practitioners can still make better use of the narrative elements that surround them. In what follows, focusing on issues surrounding patient identity, clinical reasoning and clinical ethics, I will briefly outline how veterinarians might plausibly benefit from greater attention to narrative during daily practice.

*How healthcare providers respond to the affective aspects of what their patients say during a consultation is of importance to patient outcomes – not just in terms of patient compliance, but also in terms of promoting interventions that are sympathetic to the way people choose to live their lives.*

In the first instance, narrative confers identity. The stories owners tell about their animals contain anecdotal and biographical elements. As is the case with human subjects, these narrative fragments work to construct the animal's identity. When people tell stories about their animals they are asserting its subjectivity and individuality. Unsurprisingly, one of the specific needs of today's veterinary clientele is for the practitioner to treat their pets and themselves as individuals. Because narrative establishes identity, veterinarians may have to encourage and allow space for clients to tell their stories to facilitate this form of engagement (Adams and Frankel 2007). Veterinarians who seek to accommodate and participate in constructing an animal's narratives in their consultations demonstrate to the client their interest in 'who' the patient 'is' and what this means to the client, as well as how the animal's health is faring.

*Veterinarians who seek to accommodate and participate in constructing an animal's narratives in their consultations demonstrate to the client their interest in "who" the patient "is" and what this means to the client, as well as how the animal's health is faring.*

Attention to narrative can also improve clinical reasoning processes. A significant body of research indicates that, rather than being passive documents, medical records tend to mediate, and thereby constrain, the type of information exchanged between the practitioner and the patient. Consequently, in human medicine, the emphasis in clinical encounters is now explicitly on 'building', rather than 'taking', the patient's history. A synthesis of an analytical and affective way of knowing the patient is the ideal. Owners will have greater experience and a better appreciation of their animal's behaviour in a variety of different environments than can realistically be drawn during a clinical examination. This means they will have a better basis for comparison. The stories people tell about their animals can provide a different and empathetic type of understanding of the patient's behaviour, and presents the clinician with the context of the owner's decisions relating to their animal's care. Not only does narrative help to build identity; it can give the owner's perspective a more prominent place within clinical reasoning processes and provide the practitioner with vital information as to why their clients are seeking veterinary expertise.

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Finally, narrative can help veterinarians understand the ethical dimensions of their practices. Veterinarians are often presented with situations where they are forced to make value-based judgements (Yeates 2009). Our values signify what is important to us, and we often use them to frame the 'evidence' that otherwise guides our actions. Veterinarians and their clients can both feel ethically compromised by clinical encounters in which these values are not explicitly articulated. Careful attention to the meaning and effect contained in the narratives that surround the patient allows the veterinarian to appreciate how the client believes the animal should be valued and to react accordingly. Moreover, clients can be given information about biological realities, therapeutic

options, and personal advice as additions or modifications to the animal patient's narrative. The stories told by clients can give clinicians the metaphorical tools and narrative exemplars with which to initiate shared decision making, and communicate their findings and recommendations within a language that the client can relate to and easily understand.

*Trying to think “with” rather than “about” the narrative can help veterinarians gain an empathic understanding of their patient's identity and the client's perspective and values.*

Experiences in human medicine indicate that paying close attention to an owner's stories and anecdotes about their animal need not supplant other forms of medical evidence. Narratives provide the framework that gives physical findings about a patient their normative value and impetus for action. Owners bring their animals to veterinarians seeking an explanation, a framework within which to understand what is going on, guidance and possibly treatment. Trying to think ‘with’ rather than ‘about’ the narrative can help veterinarians gain an empathic understanding of their patient's identity and the client's perspective and values. Taking the time for storytelling can also shape the experience of the attentive listener by involving them in the production of a shared knowledge that can potentially have moral worth, for clients and veterinarians alike.

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