The value of Schwartz Rounds should not be underestimated

Having facilitated more than a dozen Schwartz Rounds, I have come to realise that being a health professional is an extremely odd lifestyle choice. Our working lives consist of a daily diet of trauma, death and dying, and chronic illness. We carry with us throughout our professional lives the life and death stories of our patients and yet there is rarely an opportunity to stop, just for a moment, and reflect.

Schwartz Rounds offer exactly that – a chance to sit down for just an hour every month and share these stories with our colleagues. And it is in this process that I have had some of the most touching and moving experiences of my career: the consultant who feels out of his depth, the GP who carries the weight of an early mistake with him throughout the entirety of his career, the nurse who cannot speak to her colleague and friend about her own diagnosis of cancer.

Perhaps our most memorable and emotional round featured a panel of consultants, senior nurses and a porter, all of whom were discussing the patient they would never forget. It was the porter’s story that to this day brings tears not only to my eyes but also to those of anybody else who was present. Aged just 16 years old, he was straight out of school when he received the call to go and collect a deceased baby and take her to the mortuary. Thrown into a situation that would stay with him for the rest of his life, he was the one who had to escort a bereaved young mother and her tiny child on this final journey.

You may say, “So what? It’s our job, it’s what we’re paid for”. Yes, there is trauma and sadness, but we just have to dust ourselves off and carry on. But I’m afraid I disagree. My experience with Schwartz Rounds is that they help on a number of levels. There is catharsis in being able to share stories with colleagues. Many experiences that have come up date back decades and have been carried by the professional for all that time.

Those in the audience learn to sit with the sadness and find resonance in their own working lives. Audiences frequently tell us they have gained knowledge that will help them care for their patients and help them work better with colleagues. This has to be good for staff experience and the link between positive staff experience and better patient care.

Schwartz Rounds do require time out and it can be difficult to take time for ourselves. But I feel the time is right – and perhaps even essential – to do this on a regular basis. My fear is that without the opportunity to regularly reflect on the stresses of our jobs, we may become unable to process the burdens we carry. I’ll leave it to the words of one of our junior nurses: “It’s nice to know all health professionals experience similar feelings, helpful to share that we are all human – very humbling to listen to.”

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Further information about Schwartz Rounds can be accessed at bit.ly/PoCFSchwartzRounds