WIT: A FILM REVIEW
BY TRACY LEVETT-JONES

Wit is a prize winning play originally written for theatre by Margaret Edson (1999) and later developed into an acclaimed screenplay (Nicols, 2001). The film portrays Vivian Bearing, a 48-year-old English professor, battling metastatic ovarian cancer. Throughout the film Vivian narrates her own story, weaving memories of her life and career into the present drama of an aggressive chemotherapy regimen.

The truth of Vivian’s disease is in her pain, fear, isolation and hopelessness. The film provides a rich stimulus for learning and opportunities to re-examine the ethos of contemporary healthcare. Issues such as care versus cure, dehumanisation, paternalism, and provision of healthcare that is callous, indifferent and cruel, are portrayed evocatively in Wit, and can be used to evoke meaningful conversations about the solitude of illness and the need for empathy in times of crisis.

Wit is merciless in showing the profound divide between Vivian and the health professionals responsible for her care. She is both physically isolated (due to her suppressed immune system) and metaphorically isolated because of the chasm between her suffering and the indifference of those caring for her. Once a proud, aloof, witty, and fiercely independent woman, she is now, at the end of her life, completely alone (McAllister, Levett-Jones, Lasater & Petrini).

The use of monologue, also referred to as ‘breaking the fourth wall’ (Hunter, 2008), where the character speaks directly to the audience, allows Vivian to articulate her thoughts and feelings throughout the film. This first person narration provides deep insights into her experiences, fears and pain, for example:

Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness. I’m scared. Oh, God … I want to tell you how it feels. I want to explain it, to use my words. I am in terrible pain. They have to do something. I’m in terrible pain. It hurts like hell. It really does.

DISCUSSION/REFLECTION QUESTIONS

When using Wit as a stimulus for teaching, Vivian’s pain, loneliness and isolation can act as a counterpoint against which the commitment of healthcare professionals to work in partnership with patients and the provision of empathic care can be discussed. The questions below can also be used as a stimulus for discussion and reflection:

1. Why is the repeated use of the question ‘How are you feeling today’ by the healthcare professionals in Wit so ironic?
2. Discuss clinical behaviours from clinical interview and examination scene that illustrate the antithesis to empathy (e.g. indifference and callousness):
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgeOJPxxXjQ
3. How does Professor Ashford portray empathy when she visits Vivian in hospital and reads to her from The Runaway Bunny (Brown 1942):
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2jCPwdgAWs
4. As the film evolves, how does Vivian transform from an unsympathetic character to a vulnerable person in desperate need of empathic care?
5. How does Viviane’s nurse, Susie, demonstrate empathy in the popsicle scene:
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS8Bqgie_RA

RELATED RESEARCH

Hunter (2008) examined the impact of the film Wit on the empathy levels of healthcare students (radiography n = 7, respiratory therapy n = 16, nursing n = 46, and graduate nursing students n = 55). Empathy scores, measured using the Balanced Emotional Empathy Scale (BEES), were assessed pre post viewing of the film, and again two months later. BEES scores increased post-test and remained higher than baseline at two months follow up, although follow up scores were lower than post-test scores.

A multimodal program on death and dying incorporating the film Wit was delivered to pharmacy students over five weeks (Manolakis et al, 2011). The program content included lectures on ethics, understanding and appreciating patient values, the concept of suffering, cultural competence, and therapeutics related to oncology. A hospice staff member also delivered content on hospice care where Wit was presented and discussed. A one group design (n = 56 students) was used and a significant increase in pre post BEES scores was identified.

LINK


EXCERPT FROM WIT

Trailer - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bROGmi93prk
REFERENCES