# Narrative Medicine – the use of History and Story in understanding Health and Illness.

Lotte Hvas, MD, Specialist in Family Medicine, DMSc  
Research Unit for General Practice, University of Copenhagen

The word ”narrative” originates from *narrare*= to tell. It is a word used widely in different contexts e.g. journalism, private marketing or psychotherapy. But it also makes sense for health care professionals to us a narrative approach in medicine, in order to better understand patients and their experiences with health, symptoms and diseases.   
Everybody tells stories: About a party, about experiences during a holiday, about meetings with a doctor or nurse.  
Telling stories is simply part of being a human, because it helps us to construct meaning in chaos.

Narratives deal with how we experience the world and what we think is right or wrong, as well as the ethical implications of our actions. It deals with hopes, dreams and fears and how we see ”us” in relation to ”others”. In short, it deals with our values.  
Narratives surround us all the time, some of them are our own, but often they are shaped by our culture or society. Narratives constitute what we are allowed to say and do. Some give us hope and empower us, some give us limitations, e. g narratives about what we ought to do as women or men, and how we ought to behave as patients, parents or employees.

We also use narratives to tell and understand why we have got ill, how we can get well, and what is likely to happen in the future.

As health care providers we have to listen to peoples narratives, and meet the persons as individuals, with their own, unique stories. This helps us understand the patient’s point of view, and might even help them to construct a better working story – that might give them a feeling of control and influence, even with a serious disease.   
To use a narrative approach, might open up for a better understanding. How do patients think and feel, not only about symptoms, but also about the feelings and thoughts in relation to having the symptoms, e.g. fears and shame? We might even get an idea about why this person has got a disease and to help the patient to maintain or return to good health after illness.  
  
In this lecture I will talk about narratives in a medical setting, with examples from the daily life of patients, doctors and nurses, supplied by theoretical considerations about ”how to do”.