Emotional intelligence in radiology: an essential skill for the success of the modern radiologist

Inteligencia emocional en radiología: una competencia imprescindible para el éxito del radiólogo moderno

In contemporary radiology practice, technical mastery and scientific knowledge alone are insufficient to guarantee quality medical care. The academic rigor with which we strive to provide patients with accurate diagnoses must be matched by an equal effort to gain their trust and make them feel cared for and supported. Achieving the latter is as much of a challenge as making an accurate diagnosis and requires soft skills that are not typically part of a radiologist's formal education. Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognize and interpret the emotions of others, manage one's own behavior according to the context, and consider the needs and concerns of others. It encompasses self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social interaction patterns.

Why, then, is it relevant to develop EI in the practice of radiology? First, because it facilitates communication with referring physicians, reduces misunderstandings between specialists, and leads to better clinical decision-making. Second, because it optimizes team performance, fosters cooperation, and promotes problem-solving based on trust. Thirdly, because it reduces error through introspection and self-regulation, it allows us to recognize when fatigue, distractions, and excessive stress are detrimental to individual or group performance.

Finally, because it increases leadership skills through understanding the need for group motivation, constructive feedback, ethical decision-making, and the importance of consistency in action (1). Therefore, EI is a determining factor for the professional growth and well-being of radiologists, as it strengthens their resilience and adaptability.

Although direct interaction with patients may be limited in some areas of the specialty, clinical scenarios requiring the communication of sensitive information—such as diagnoses with serious or unfavorable implications, or risks associated with interventional procedures—demand a high degree of empathy and assertiveness from radiologists. Even in circumstances where interaction with the patient and their referring physician takes place solely through the radiology report, achieving effective communication that causes as little anxiety as possible for the former, but is at the same time clear to the latter, requires a higher level of EI. It should be added that, in other daily roles such as participation in multidisciplinary teams, supervision of staff in training, and management of other collaborators, EI acts as a bridge that allows the radiologist to contribute to comprehensive patient care not only through diagnosis, but also through the coordination and leadership of the human talent that makes up the diagnostic support team.

How can emotional intelligence be developed and strengthened in radiology? Recent publications, such as the educational perspective of Sharbatdaran et al., highlight the urgency of teaching these skills from the early stages of medical training (1). The authors emphasize that, in the vast majority of medical schools worldwide, especially in developing countries, teaching efforts aimed at refining soft skills—such as reporting diagnoses with empathy and communicating bad news with compassion—are relegated to a "hidden curriculum" based on imitation of behavioral models rather than structured pedagogical strategies (2). Evidence shows that initiatives such as simulating difficult conversations, narrative medicine workshops, training in empathetic feedback, emotional self-awareness, cultural competency programs, and training in structuring and writing radiology reports are the most relevant proposals for the development of EI in the practice of the specialty.

The implementation of these strategies should not be viewed as an additional bureaucratic burden, but rather as an investment that will have a positive impact on the comprehensive training of modern radiologists. In a recent interview with RSNA News, Dr. Richard Gunderman, professor of radiology at Indiana University, mentioned that radiology has now become such a sought-after and competitive specialty that residency program directors, aware of the importance of EI, are increasingly tending to choose, from among many highly qualified applicants, those who demonstrate superior EI qualities (3). In short, training specialists with high EI translates into more humanized clinical environments, highly cohesive work teams, effective communication, and, ultimately, better patient care.

References

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