

Lifting Health Professionals' Morale During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Moderating Emotions to Support Ethical Decisions

Pablo González Blasco, Maria Auxiliadora C. de Benedetto, Marcelo R. Levites and Graziela Moreto

Volume 4, Number 1, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077644ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077644ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Programmes de bioéthique, École de santé publique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

2561-4665 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Blasco, P. G., de Benedetto, M. A. C., Levites, M. R. & Moreto, G. (2021). Lifting Health Professionals' Morale During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Moderating Emotions to Support Ethical Decisions. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics / Revue canadienne de bioéthique*, 4(1), 179–186. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077644ar>

Article abstract

The current COVID-19 pandemic creates a difficult and unprecedented time. With each passing day, the care of the health team itself is essential; and not only physical care, but also for mental health. The authors describe their experience in disseminating recommendations through short videos to help professionals maintain an objective view of the reality they are experiencing. Thus, knowing how to tabulate daily the evolution of the patients that each professional has been entrusted to care for – the hospitalized, the deaths and, very importantly, the discharge of the recovered – provides a sense of reality. Cinema, an educational resource used in medical education, which is also included in these videos, helps to clarify the recommendations made above and to maintain emotional balance. The authors conclude that providing a realistic view of the situation that the team is experiencing in this crisis and highlighting the positive facts and achievements could be a valuable means of help from medical educators behind the scenes.



ART, CULTURE ET OEUVRE DE CRÉATION / ART, CULTURE & CREATIVE WORKS

Lifting Health Professionals' Morale During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Moderating Emotions to Support Ethical Decisions



Pablo González Blasco^a
Maria Auxiliadora C. de Benedetto^a
Marcelo R. Levites^a
Graziela Moreto^a

Résumé

La pandémie actuelle de COVID-19 nous fait vivre une période difficile et sans précédent. Chaque jour qui passe, les soins de l'équipe de santé elle-même sont essentiels. Non seulement les soins physiques, mais aussi la santé mentale. Les auteurs décrivent leur expérience dans la diffusion de recommandations par le biais de courtes vidéos qui aident les professionnels à garder un regard objectif sur la réalité qu'ils vivent. Ainsi, savoir comptabiliser quotidiennement l'évolution des patients dont chaque professionnel a été chargé de s'occuper – les hospitalisés, les décès et, très important, la sortie des personnes rétablies – donne un sens de la réalité. Le cinéma, ressource pédagogique utilisée dans l'enseignement médical, qui figure également dans ces vidéos, aide à clarifier les recommandations formulées ci-dessus et à maintenir l'équilibre émotionnel. Les auteurs concluent que le fait de donner une vision réaliste des faits que l'équipe vit dans cette crise et de souligner les faits positifs et les réalisations pourrait être une aide précieuse apportée par les éducateurs médicaux depuis l'arrière-scène.

Mots-clés

COVID-19, enseignement par vidéo, travail d'équipe, équilibre émotionnel, objectivité

Abstract

The current COVID-19 pandemic creates a difficult and unprecedented time. With each passing day, the care of the health team itself is essential; and not only physical care, but also for mental health. The authors describe their experience in disseminating recommendations through short videos to help professionals maintain an objective view of the reality they are experiencing. Thus, knowing how to tabulate daily the evolution of the patients that each professional has been entrusted to care for – the hospitalized, the deaths and, very importantly, the discharge of the recovered – provides a sense of reality. Cinema, an educational resource used in medical education, which is also included in these videos, helps to clarify the recommendations made above and to maintain emotional balance. The authors conclude that providing a realistic view of the situation that the team is experiencing in this crisis and highlighting the positive facts and achievements could be a valuable means of help from medical educators behind the scenes.

Keywords

COVID-19, video teaching, teamwork, emotional balance, objectivity

Affiliations

^a SOBRAMFA - Medical Education and Humanism, São Paulo, Brazil

Correspondance / Correspondence: Pablo Blasco, pablogb@sobramfa.com.br

INTRODUCTION

The current COVID-19 pandemic creates difficult and unprecedented times. The efforts of all health professionals, each in their own competencies, are essential. While researchers and scientists struggle to find therapeutic resources that can be effective, those on the frontline devote their best efforts to the clinical care of affected patients. It is worth asking what the role of those involved in medical education would be at this moment to collaborate in responding to this global crisis. As senior doctors and professors, our place is certainly not on the front line, in the trenches. But we need to help: first of all, the team of doctors we coordinate, the health professionals around us and, as well as patients and families (1).

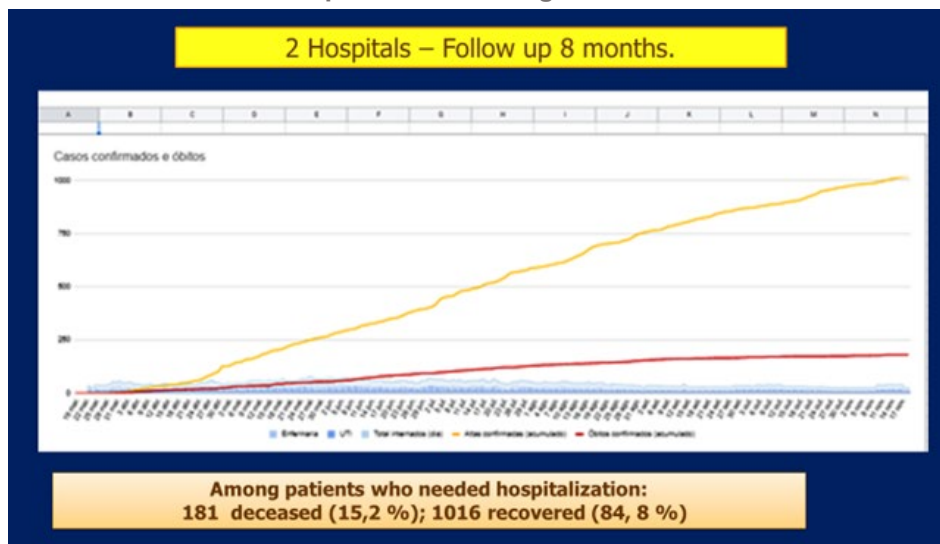
With each passing day, the care of the health team itself is essential; and not only physical care (for which all possible measures are taken in each case), but also care for mental health. Put more simply, it is crucial to raise the morale of those who deal daily with this threat of unique proportions. A discouraged, pessimistic doctor could become a contributing element of the crisis; that attitude causes insecurity in patients – even more than what usually comes to them from the media – and also does not help the health team. Family medicine, in dealing with both the emotional and the scientific side of medicine on a daily basis, plays a central role in facing this pandemic (2). Seeking to collaborate in this sense, our private institution of family practice physicians in Brazil, *SOBRAMFA - Medical Education and Humanism* (3), has disseminated recommendations through short videos (4) that help professionals to maintain an objective view of the reality they are experiencing (5). An excessive and disproportionate concern for the global problems that the world is facing, does not help – and even hinders – each professional to assume their own responsibilities. In addition to helping with a realistic perspective, the videos address aspects of affective education and how to moderate emotions to help with the ethical decisions that daily medical practice requires.

OBJECTIVITY AND REALISM: A PORTRAIT OF DAILY REALITY

Global information, which is available to anyone and is important for health policies, may not be particularly relevant for what each professional has to face on a daily basis. Such information can even generate an anticipated concern and, worse, distract

professionals from their own responsibilities. It is possible, to adapt an old saying, that too much focus on the forest can prevent one from seeing the trees that need help. It is necessary to think globally but act locally (6). For example, the team we coordinate operates in two small hospitals and is responsible for several nursing homes, with more than 600 elderly guests (clients). Thus, knowing how to tabulate daily the evolution of patients that each professional has been entrusted to care for – the hospitalized, the deaths and, very importantly, the discharge of the recovered – can provide a sense of reality (7). The strategy adopted in the nursing homes to face the pandemic is well described in a recent published report (8). For the hospitals – which are not directly on the front line for COVID patients – the frequent tabulation of real data can bring a realistic and numerical view of our “own courtyard” (See Graphic 1).

Graphic 1. Monitoring COVID 19



DEALING WITH EMOTIONS: AN EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGE

The crisis we are experiencing has two components: on the one hand, there is the biological threat of a new virus with terrible consequences for population health, since we are dealing with something unknown. On the other hand, there are chaotic emotions that could be a threat to professionals' mental balance and the serenity necessary to cope with such a great challenge. The poet Pessoa illuminates this reflection: “*Life is what we make of it / Travel is mostly the travelers / What we see is not what we see / but what we are*” (9). In other words, we filter reality through our emotions, through the way we are experiencing that reality. This explains the anguish and afflictions that may arise when we consider the reality of the situation we have to face, and with our feelings and emotions amplified and deformed by the world panorama presented by the media.

In medical practice, ethical dilemmas are often blurred by emotions: those of the patients and those of the professional who takes care of them. To teach ethics implies setting out rules, guidelines and processes for rational decision-making. But it also requires creativity and acknowledgement of the affective aspects of our decision-making processes. Usually, ethical inquiries involve emotions, and those emotions cannot be ignored. Instead, they should be included in the learning process as an essential tool. Training human beings requires educating their affectivity, working with their emotions. To share emotions, in an open discussion surrounded by a friendly learning scenario, can create the path for affective education and foster empathy that empowers professionals and improves patient care (10). Educators need to go beyond instructions and perform a caring model in the pursuit of excellence. Educating attitudes is more than offering theoretical concepts or simple training; it implies promoting reflection that facilitates the discovery of oneself and allows to extract from the intimate core of the human being a commitment to improve (11).

Humanities such as literature, music, cinema and narratives are a useful resource for educating emotions and promoting empathy (12), which is the cornerstone of medical professionalism and ethical behaviour (13). The emotions that these experiences arouse must be transformed by reflection into experiences that generate attitudes capable of building ethical behaviour and professionalism (14).

MOVIES TEMPERING EMOTIONS AND FAVOURING ETHICAL DECISIONS

The cinema, an educational resource used in medical education (15,16), is included in the videos we developed for health professionals (4). Using clips from different film scenes (17), the aim is to help clarify details of the commented recommendations (18). Below we list some ethical issues as well as the corresponding movie scenes that can help with health professional decision making.

How to work with fears and insecurities?

Here is a dilemma whose answer depends on the moral fiber of each person. In the face of challenges and dangers, the answers are varied. In *Titanic* (1997) we see that while some seek to save themselves at any cost, others value teamwork, and remain attached to the mission: "Gentlemen, it was a pleasure to play with you tonight." A similar situation is presented in *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), where the obsessive search for security is the counterpart of living in permanent tension. Living in fear is like half-living, according to the protagonist, a situation that is also presented in *Changing Lanes* (2002) – what would be the life you could have had if you had made another choice?

Figure 1. *Titanic*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120338/>

Figure 2. *Strictly Ballroom*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105488/>

Figure 3. *Changing Lanes*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0264472/>

Seeking for help: advice and coaching

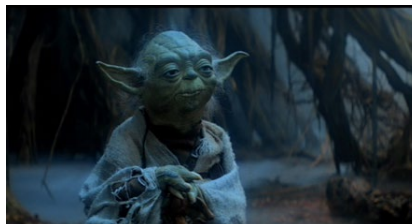
Solving the challenges that we face implies the wisdom of knowing how to seek help and advice. No one is born with wisdom; we need to allow to be educated. Cinema is a frequent stage of this educational dimension where the need to ask for help is highlighted. *The Guardian* (2006) presents several pertinent scenes: the objective of the rescue school is stated, a teacher is included whose mission is to bridge the gap that exists between theory and practice, and he teaches the outstanding student in practice that it is not always possible to win all the battles. The *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) mythology has in Master Yoda a true paradigm of counsellor and effective coaching: "You have to unlearn what you learned wrongly." That is YODA advice, which in the original interpretation of some authors is an acronym for Your Own Data Appraiser (19). Teacher films, such as *Music of the Heart* (1999), showing the importance of inner strength (and not just physical strength) to achieve the goal; or the need to learn to enjoy what you do to do it well, as in *De-Lovely* (2004); and films portraying leaders who know how to get the best out of each of their subordinates, like *Men of Honor* (2000).

Figure 4. *The Guardian*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0406816/>

Figure 5. *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080684/>

Figure 6. *Music of the Heart*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0166943/>

Figure 7. *De-Lovely*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0352277/>

Figure 8. *Men of Honor*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0203019/>

Leadership in Education

This theme is related to the previous topic. In the film *The Hurricane* (1999), the importance in on writing, which is the way to make our thoughts clear to ourselves. Or the teacher's creativity in *Innocent Moves/Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), where he removes the chessboard pieces so that the student can visualize the move. Or the gratitude of those who notice that the teacher taught them to live beyond protocols and guidelines and to be creative in life, as in *Instinct* (1999). There is also the apparent hardness of those who do not agree with mediocrity and help to overcome their complexes, as in *Limelight* (1952). And the educator who shows that life always hits hard, but the important thing is to always get up, as is shown in *Rocky Balboa* (2006).

Figure 9. *The Hurricane*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0174856/>

Figure 10. *Innocent Moves*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108065/>

Figure. 11 *Instinct*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0128278/>

Figure 12. *Limelight*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0044837/>

Figure 13. *Rocky Balboa*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0479143/>

The Leader's doubts

It is well known that when a leader openly acknowledges their mistakes, it has a formative effect of great impact. How, then, to work out the leader's weakness? Cinema brings us notable examples. In *Defiance* (2008), we can see the leader's hesitations, and how those he formed help him not to give up. In *Scent of a Woman* (1992) the critical moment: "Give me a good reason not to kill myself" gets the answer from the disciple who was educated by the leader in crisis: "I'll give you two: you dance tango and drive Ferrari like no one else". The apparent failures of life are another weakness, as in *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995), until it is revealed that students are the real notes of a symphony that he has been building with his pedagogical attitude. The strength of a leader comes from the mission: in *Star War: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), it is worth highlighting the cane that Yoda uses just to walk, but he has no need of it when facing the warriors on the dark side.

Figure 14. *Defiance*



IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1034303/>

Figure 15. *Scent of a Woman*

IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105323/>

Figure 16. *Mr. Holland's Opus*

IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113862/>

Figure 17. *Star Wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back*

IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0080684/>

Humanities, aesthetics and art: a path to serenity

Some film scenes, including excerpts from Opera, clearly show how aesthetics is an essential aid to maintain the serenity that arises from the humanistic attitude. *Pretty Woman* (1990), with the background of *La Traviata* (which is actually the same story of the protagonist, located in Paris in the 19th century), and the environment theme (*Amame Alfredo*, meaning: "love me Alfredo, get me out of this miserable life"). What is two hours of Opera capable of producing for someone who has never seen a performance, never heard about Verdi, nor knows the story of the *Lady of Camellias*? Another classic scene is in *Philadelphia* (1993), where the trapped lawyer who does not know Opera is surprised by Andrea Chenier's aria. The viewer wonders at the end who sang the aria: Maria Callas or Tom Hanks himself?

Social isolation is also recommended. Free museums and concerts are available on the Internet. But while cultural opportunities are unique, we feel something is lacking. Aristotle said that human beings are social animals, and what we lack is the experience of living the whole culture with someone, in society. At this point, cinema illuminates the challenge: In *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), the educated banker finds a record of "Figaro's Wedding" and realizes that he cannot enjoy Mozart's melody in solitude. He plays it on loudspeakers and for a few minutes all those prisoners felt free. What we probably need is physical distance, but social connectivity, as some authors recently point out.

Life is Beautiful (1997), offers one of the most romantic scenes produced in cinema, also through Opera. The protagonist looks at his beloved during the Barcarole of *The Tales of Hoffman*, apparently distracted. Then, in the concentration camp, finds the same music, and puts it on to play, opening the window. The melody flies to the women's pavilion, waking only his wife who knows that it is he, her husband, who is talking to her. They do not see, do not touch, do not speak, but it is a remarkable romanticism.

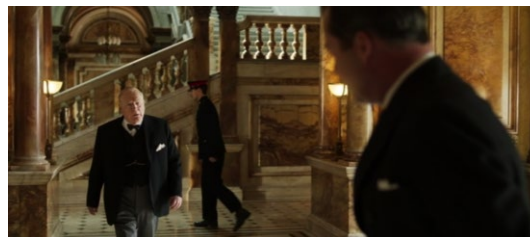
Figure 18. *Pretty Woman*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0100405/>Figure 19. *Philadelphia*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0107818/>Figure 20. *The Shawshank Redemption*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111161/>Figure 21. *Life is Beautiful*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0118799/>

What is the legacy of my life?

Legacy is a successfully placed theme in *About Schmidt* (2002), in the monologue of the protagonist who wonders, “what difference have I made with my life? What’s better in the world because of me?” It is a question of vital importance. Although it is always possible to answer that we did our duty – what was foreseen and contracted – the answer does not always satisfy us. It is the contrast presented by the film *Broken Embraces* (2009) where the professional confines herself to lip reading, without omitting opinions or judgments (after all she was hired just for that). A huge contrast of that “aseptic attitude”, is set in *Schindler’s List* (1993), in the anthological scene where Oskar Schindler understands that he could have done more. It does not comfort him to know that he has done more than most people, that he is much better than the others: he knows that he could have done more. And he cries disconsolately, feeling the pain of omission. Doing everything possible without being content with what is expected or fair.

Commitment also requires the prudence of knowing our role. In the film *Churchill* (2017), the dialogue with the King enlightens this topic. Churchill wants both himself and the King to be present at the Normandy landings, to set an example. The King shows him that this example would be of no use, except to jeopardize the safety of both. “Our role now is not to fight, but to exist, to survive, so that we can cheer and optimize everyone”.

Figure 22. *About Schmidt*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0257360/>Figure 23. *Broken Embraces*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0913425/>

Figure 24 *Schindler's List*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/>Figure 25. *Churchill*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2674454/>

THE BOTTOM LINE: REDEEMING THE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE ROLE FOR EDUCATORS AND LEADERS

Circumstances challenge but cannot condition us. It is impossible not to evoke at this point Ortega y Gasset's reflections in his *Meditations on Don Quixote* (20), to live what we have, in our conditions and circumstances. Hence the well-known phrase of the philosopher, "It is me and my circumstances, and if I do not save them, I do not save myself," a phrase often cited but mostly incomplete. Circumstances are placed, in popular culture, as an excuse and not as a challenge to be saved, redeemed. For this reason, Ortega adds: "We have to search for our circumstances what is peculiar, the right place in the immense perspective of the world. Not dwell on fixed values but conquer the right place among them in our individual lives. In short: the reabsorption of circumstances is the specific destiny of man." To redeem the circumstances, that's what it's about.

The toxic news that arrives daily through all the communication channels, saturates and depresses. Tragedies, which certainly exist, are highlighted but conquests and overcoming are omitted. We see how the people around us – citizens, patients and, of course, health professionals – succumb to this bombardment. What we need is to pay attention to what we have at hand, without getting lost in dreams or fantasies, or in chimeras and fears.

It is worth invoking D. Quixote again through Ortega's reflections: "The enchanters may well take my luck, but not the effort and the spirit. If we resist that inheritance and the environment imposes certain actions on us, it is because we try to base ourselves, only on ourselves, on the origin of our actions. When the hero wants, it is not the ancestors or the customs of the present who want something, but himself. Heroism consists precisely in this desire to be himself who he has to be." Here come together the mission and the dream, as D. Quixote reminds us in *Man of La Mancha* (1972) singing that unforgettable song: the impossible dream (21).

Figure 26. *Man of La Mancha*IMDB: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068909/>**Reçu/Received:** 22/05/2020**Remerciements**

Notre gratitude à Mme Jaqueline da Silva Queiroz, pour le montage de la série de vidéos « Medical Humanism in Times of Crisis », et à M. Elvis P. Fernandes pour le montage des images d'écran.

Conflits d'intérêts

Aucun à déclarer

Publié/Published: 01/06/2021**Acknowledgements**

Our gratitude to Ms. Jaqueline da Silva Queiroz, for Editing the Video Series "Medical Humanism in Times of Crisis", and to Mr. Elvis P. Fernandes for editing the screen images.

Conflicts of Interest

None to declare

Édition/Editors: Jacques Quintin & Jessika Roy-Desruisseaux

Les éditeurs suivent les recommandations et les procédures décrites dans le [Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors](#) de COPE. Plus précisément, ils travaillent pour s'assurer des plus hautes normes éthiques de la publication, y compris l'identification et la gestion des conflits d'intérêts (pour les éditeurs et pour les auteurs), la juste évaluation des manuscrits et la publication de manuscrits qui répondent aux normes d'excellence de la revue.

The editors follow the recommendations and procedures outlined in the COPE [Code of Conduct and Best Practice Guidelines for Journal Editors](#). Specifically, the editors will work to ensure the highest ethical standards of publication, including: the identification and management of conflicts of interest (for editors and for authors), the fair evaluation of manuscripts, and the publication of manuscripts that meet the journal's standards of excellence.

REFERENCES

1. Blasco PG, De Benedetto MAC. [A senior family doctor supporting the health team in times of COVID-19](#). Can Fam Physician. 28 Apr 2020.
2. Sutter A, Llor C, Maier M, Mallen C, et al. [Family medicine in times of COVID-19: A generalists' voice](#). Eur J Gen Pract. 2020;26(1):58-60.
3. [SOBRAMFA - Medical Education and Humanism](#). 2020.
4. Blasco PG. [Humanismo Médico em tempos de crise](#). Vimeo. n.d.
5. Blasco PG, De Benedetto MAC, Levites MR, Moreto G, Janaudis MA. [Brazilian family medicine team develops videos: humanism and medical education in times of COVID-19](#). Annals of Family Medicine. 5 May 2020.
6. Haffajee RL, Mello MM. [Thinking globally, acting locally - The U.S. response to Covid-19](#). N Engl J Med. 2020; 382:e75.
7. Blasco PG, De Benedetto MAC, Levites MR, Moreto G. [Objectivity and realism for monitoring COVID-19 in Brazilian health facilities: a four-month follow up of two local hospitals and several nursing homes](#). Clinical Oncology Letters. 2020;4:1-6.
8. Blasco PG, De Benedetto MAC, Levites MR, Moreto G, Fernandes EP. [Medical strategies in nursing homes during the COVID-19 pandemic: A Brazilian experience](#). Australian Journal of General Practice. 2020;49:1.
9. Pessoa F. Mensagem. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Aguilar; 1976.
10. Blasco PG, Moreto G, Pessini L. [Using movie clips to promote reflective practice: a creative approach for teaching ethics](#). Asian Bioethics Review. 2018;10:75-85.
11. Blasco PG, Moreto G, Pessini L. [Medical Humanities, emotions and ethics: Using movies to foster reflective practice](#). Camillianum (Roma). 2017;49-50:99-115.
12. Moreto G, Santos I, Blasco PG, Pessini L, Lotufo PA. [Assessing empathy among medical students: A comparative analysis using two different scales in a Brazilian medical school](#). Educación Médica. 2018;19(2):162-170.
13. Triffaux JM, Tisseron S, Nasello JA. [Decline of empathy among medical students: Dehumanization or useful coping process?](#) L'Encéphale. 2019;45(1):3-8.
14. Benedetto MAC, Moreto G, Janaudis MA, Levites MR, Blasco PG. [Educando as emoções para uma atuação ética: construindo o profissionalismo médico](#). RBM Rev Bras Med (Rio de Janeiro). 2014;71:15-24.
15. Alexander M, Lenahan P, Pavlov A. Cinemeducation: a Comprehensive Guide to Using Film in Medical Education. Oxford (UK): Radcliffe Publishing; 2005.
16. Blasco PG. Humanizando a Medicina: Uma Metodologia com o Cinema. São Paulo (SP): Centro Universitário São Camilo; 2011.
17. Blasco PG, Moreto G, Roncoletta AFT, Levites MR, Janaudis MA. [Using movie clips to foster learners' reflection: improving education in the affective domain](#). Fam Med. 2006;38(2):94-6.
18. Blasco PG. [Review of Henri Colt, Silvia Quadrelli, and Lester Friedman, eds. The Picture of Health. Medical Ethics and the Movies: Getting Familiar with the Cinema Education Methodology](#). American Journal of Bioethics. 2011;11:39-41.
19. Rosser W. Information Mastery: Evidence-based Family Medicine. V1. 2nd. Hamilton (Ontario): B C Decker Inc; 2004.
20. Ortega y Gasset J. Meditaciones del Quijote. Madrid: Revista de Occidente. Alianza Editorial; 1981.
21. [Man of La Mancha \(1972\) - The Impossible Dream Scene \(6/9\) | Movieclips](#). YouTube.