

The Big Rocks Theory in General Medicine

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Jose Luis Turabian*

Specialist in Family and Community Medicine, Independent Researcher/Retired, Formerly of the Health Center Santa Maria de Benquerencia, Regional Health Service of Castilla la Mancha (SESCAM), Toledo, Spain

Editorial

In the context of a general practitioner or family medicine consultation, the Big Rocks Theory, or “putting the big rocks first,” means identifying and addressing the main reason for the consultation, the most serious health problem, or the patient’s most pressing need at the beginning of the clinical interview. The well-known parable of prioritization, often told as a lesson from an expert, uses a jar, large rocks, gravel, sand, and water to illustrate that if you don’t prioritize the essentials (big rocks) first, life will become filled with trivialities [1,2].

A speaker shows an empty jar and fills it with fist-sized rocks. He asks, “Is it full?” Everyone says yes.

He adds small pebbles (gravel) that fill the spaces between the large rocks. He asks again, “Is it full?” The attendees hesitate but nod.

He adds sand, which fills every remaining gap. He asks again. The attendees say no.

Finally, he pours water to the brim.

The speaker explains that the jar represents life. The large rocks are what’s important (family, health, friends, dreams). The gravel and sand are secondary (work, money, possessions). If you fill the jar with sand first, there won’t be room for the large rocks. The main lesson is to put the “large rocks”-your values and loved ones-first; otherwise, life becomes filled with small, irrelevant things [3,4].

What connection might this parable of putting the large rocks first have with the work of a general practitioner? Why is it essential to apply the Big Rocks Theory in general medicine? In the practice of general medicine, this parable or theory is a fundamental tool for managing high demand for care, ensuring patient safety, and preventing burnout.

It ensures patient safety: It helps to perform diagnosis and treatment more effectively; it ensures that high-risk medical problems are evaluated with a fresh mind and sufficient time, reducing diagnostic errors; It avoid the “by-the-way consultation syndrome” (If the doctor spends the first few minutes filling out prescriptions-the sand-the patient often mentions their real, serious problem: “Doctor, I’m short of breath when I walk,” just as they’re getting up to leave the office); Optimize clinical time: Allow for setting the agenda at the beginning of the appointment. The doctor can empathetically tell the patient: “Today we’re going to focus in depth on your back pain (the big rock) and we’ll leave the secondary prescriptions for the end or for another time.”

Going deeper, the direct application of the Big Rocks Theory in general medicine is established by classifying the doctor’s daily tasks into the categories of the parable:

***Corresponding author:** Jose Luis Turabian, Specialist in Family and Community Medicine, Independent Researcher/Retired, Formerly of the Health Center Santa Maria de Benquerencia. Regional Health Service of Castilla la Mancha (SESCAM), Toledo, Spain

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The “Big Rocks”: Clinical and Human Priority. The big rocks are the aspects that determine patient safety and the quality of the medical act. If the doctor doesn’t set aside time for these, the consultation becomes superficial: 1) The doctor-patient clinical interview and the doctor-patient relationship: Active listening and performing a proper physical examination, which are the foundation of human medicine; 2) The main reason for the visit (e.g., chest pain, a warning sign of cancer, or the patient’s genuine psychosocial distress) and the patient’s actual needs. 2) Critical diagnoses: Identifying serious pathologies masked by trivial symptoms (e.g., a myocardial infarction that appears as heartburn); 3) Real preventive medicine: Reviewing cardiovascular risk or performing cancer screenings that save lives in the long term. The “Gravel”: Administrative and Routine Tasks. The pebbles are the necessary but secondary administrative procedures, such as renewing prescriptions for chronic conditions without clinical changes, signing sick leave forms, reviewing routine, stable lab results, or answering non-urgent emails or calls. These are necessary elements, but they can consume all your time if not managed.

The “Sand”: Interruptions and Trivialities. The sand consists of anecdotal patient requests (“since I’m here, check this other thing...”), minor complaints, or bureaucratic distractions from the computer system. It’s the constant “noise” in the consultation room: Interruptions from colleagues or administrative staff during an examination; Consultations for minor issues that don’t require immediate medical attention but take up space in the schedule.

Consequently, if a physician fills their schedule only with “sand” (administrative tasks and minor last-minute appointments), when a patient arrives with a life-altering crisis or a complex pathology (a “big rock”), he or she will lack the time, energy, and focus to attend to them adequately. To be efficient, the physician must “put the rocks first”: fundamentally prioritizing the doctor-patient relationship and using high-quality scheduling.

The doctor-patient clinical interview and the doctor-patient relationship

These are inextricably linked. The clinical interview is the primary tool through which the doctor-patient relationship is built, sustained, and developed. While the former is the vehicle for communication and the working method, the latter is the human, ethical, and trusting bond that makes successful treatment possible. The interview is a technique, a channel, and a space for communication where the doctor-patient relationship is established and developed. The interview integrates communication and clinical reasoning; it connects the biomedical and psychosocial aspects of clinical care. The medical history, or clinical interview, is the first and most important diagnostic tool during a medical consultation and, therefore, fundamental for an accurate diagnosis.

In 80% of patients, the interview provides the diagnosis (in the remaining cases, physical examination and additional tests are needed, but even in these cases, the diagnosis is more complete when a good clinical interview has been conducted). A good interview fosters a good doctor-patient relationship. A

good doctor-patient relationship is a process in which an alliance is created: a process in which the doctor adapts to the patient’s pace; that is, detects “what rhythm” the patient is “dancing to.” The doctor-patient relationship is fundamental for both diagnosis and treatment. The importance of this relationship is evidenced by its proven influence on healthcare outcomes [5-16].

The use of quality scheduling or clinical triage systems

These elements should prioritize urgent patients over trivial ones and reserve specific time blocks for complex tasks [17-19]. To optimize general practitioner consultations, triage is no longer limited to a hospital emergency room filter. In primary care, triage is a strategic and multidisciplinary process that classifies patient requests according to their severity, the type of need, and the most appropriate professional to address it. Its main objective is to ensure that the general practitioner has time for the “big rocks,” delegating and resolving the “sand” or “pebbles” through other channels within the health center. Unlike in hospitals (where immediate life-threatening risk is assessed), triage in general practice classifies consultations along three main lines: Is it a medical emergency? Immediate referral to the on-call physician or the hospital; Is it an administrative need? The patient is referred to the admissions management units (reception desk) or digital channels; Does it require non-medical clinical attention? The patient is referred to the center’s nursing, physiotherapy, midwifery, or social work professional. The triage structure can rely on administrative staff at the admissions desk (reception and telephone), nursing staff, or can be implemented through digital triage and self-triage. A well-functioning primary care triage system completely transforms the general practitioner’s workday [20].

In short, in general practice, the “Big Rocks” theory involves prioritizing the doctor-patient interview and relationship, identifying the main, serious biopsychosocial, or primary reason for the consultation from the outset, and scheduling appointments empathetically to prevent bureaucracy and minor requests from overshadowing what is clinically and psychosocially urgent within the limited available time.

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