

Can Humanities and Arts Make You a Better Doctor?

I. Introduction

- A. My background – I am a psychologist by training, and have spent more than 30 years in the UCI Department of Family Medicine, teaching about the doctor-patient relationship. For the past 10 years have directed the program in medical humanities at UCI, which uses literature and the arts in medical education to help students develop greater empathy and compassion for patients.
- B. What we're going to consider today is whether literature and the arts can help you become better doctors
 - 1. SLIDE: I do understand that not everybody loves poetry. So here's my joke: A bunch of guys in ski masks, wielding automatic weapons, burst into a crowded bank. The leader shouts out: "Everyone stay where you are, and no one will get hurt. I just want to read you some of my poems." What makes this (at least somewhat) funny is the extreme lengths some people will go to, to make other people listen to some poetry
 - 2. So be forewarned, I'm going to inflict a few poems on you, but hopefully nobody will feel held hostage .

II. Jerome Bruner, a famous cognitive psychologist, identified

- A. SLIDE: Two Ways of Knowing: by knowing, he meant how we understand and make sense of the world
- B. Logico-scientific knowledge -
 - 1. What you'll spend a great deal of time learning in medical school; this kind of knowledge will teach you how bodies work, how they break down, and sometimes how to fix them
 - 2. It is knowledge that emphasizes objectivity, detachment,
 - 3. identification and application of general rules and principles
 - 4. Biophysical knowledge of disease
- C. Narrative knowledge
 - 1. A way of understanding the people who live in the bodies, of listening to and empathizing with their stories, their experiences, their hopes and fears
 - 2. Narrative knowledge is based on a universal human need to tell stories
 - a. Stories are how we make sense of our experience
 - b. how we explore questions of meaning and suffering
 - 3. Narrative knowledge acknowledges that multiple points of view can exist simultaneously
 - 4. Leads to a biopsychosocial/cultural understanding of illness
- C. It's easy at this point in your education to think that
 - 1. Science will answer all the questions you have about the practice of medicine;
 - 2. SLIDE: If you memorize enough anatomy and pathophysiology, you'll be a good doctor.
- D. SLIDE: It's also easy to think that empathy and compassion can't be taught at all
 - 1. Empathy isn't something you do, it's part of who you are
 - 2. If you have it, it comes naturally, so you don't have to worry about

- E. To be a really good doctor,**
- 1. you'll need anatomy and pathophysiology and molecular genetics, but they won't be enough.**
 - 2. And while I agree in a sense that compassion can't exactly be taught, it can be practiced and it can also be forgotten, so over the course of your training you'll need to find ways of reminding yourself to cultivate an empathic and tender heart**
 - 3. Literature and the arts are one way to keep this compassionate heart alive**

III. But What Is It Exactly that the Arts and Humanities Can Teach Us?

A. Truer than the truth (Old Folk Proverb)

- 1. What does this mean?**
- 2. A good story or poem can give us insights and teach us truths that mere facts cannot**
- 3. Involve us emotionally as well as intellectually**
- 3. Help us see familiar experiences in new ways because they provide a different vantage point from which to consider the same old experience**

D. "Walking the Dog"

- 1. Who here knows how to treat Type II diabetes?**
- 2. In this poem, the doctor looks at an old problem – overweight patient with diabetes - in a new way, and learns something in the process**
- 3. The doctor prescribes a pet, which helps all of us think outside the box in terms of innovative therapies**
- 4. But the treatment doesn't work!, at least not in the way he thought it would, so the narrator (and we, the readers) have to grapple with the fact that patients don't always do what doctors tell them to do**
- 5. Yet in one final twist that shows us truth truer than the truth, in this apparently futile act, the poem conveys the value of the doctor's caring and concern for this patient.**
- 6. Wright's poem helps us understand something about diabetes and about the intricacies of the doctor-patient relationship that we might not have understood through textbook knowledge alone**

IV. Enlarging Our Perspective (Hmong Saying)

- A. One of the things medical education is really good at is teaching what the point is and how to stick to it - what's relevant and what's immaterial**
- B. Unfortunately, sticking to your point as a doctor may sometimes mean missing the patient's point**
- C. Literature reminds us that sometimes we can learn a lot by not being so quick to judge what belongs and what doesn't in a patient's story**
- D. In "The Knitted Glove" at first it seems that the point of this story is to figure out how to treat and cure the patient's ever-migrating pain –**
 - 1. This is the physician's truth**
 - 2. Acting on this truth, the physician fantasizes about aggressive destroying the pain (wrestling it to the ground and slaying it)**
 - 3. But by the end of the poem he comes to realize a truer truth –**

4. The point is not only the pain, but being willing to listen to the patient's story about the pain

V. Paying Attention to Values (Einstein quote)

A. Good doctors need to figure out every day “what should be” –

1. In the lives of their patients, in their illnesses, in their suffering, and in their deaths –

2. And in their own lives as well

B. Literature can help us explore our values not just theoretically, but in very concrete, emotionally engaging ways

C. In “I Stepped Past Your Room” this family physician examines a moral lapse

1. He avoids entering the room of his dying patient

2. Yet by reflecting on his avoidance, by reflecting on the person of the patient with whom he has taken this terrible journey, he is able to move past his own fears and, as so often happens, find solace in the courage of his patient

3. The physician is able not only to avoid abandoning his patient, but to avoid abandoning himself

4. In doing so, he is able to reconnect with his deeply held values, his truest truths, about what it means to be a physician

VI. Mystery and Awe (Remen quote)

A. Medicine is larger than science

B. Life is larger than science

C. Leave room in the practice of medicine for awe and mystery

D. Twisted lips story

VII. Comparing the Medical Record and the Human Record

A. Read the pathology report: what does it tell you? How does it help you?

B. Read the poem: What does it tell you? How does it help you?

VIII. So What Are the “Truths” that We Can Find through Literature and Art?

Remind Us to...

A. Pay close attention to the richness, particularity, and nuances of patients (the woman with diabetes cuddling her dog; the gloved hand of the patient with arthritis)

B. Acknowledge the important role that creativity and imagination play in the art of doctoring (Wright prescribing a dog; Coulehan conceptualizing pain as Coyote the trickster; Greenstone having the courage to envision his patient's life)

C. Maintain empathy for multiple points of view in patient care (in the case history, we see the perspective of the physicians; and the perspective of the patient)

D. Place patients within the context of their lived experience, rather than solely within the context of clinic or hospital (the poem Waiting reminds us that patients have lives outside the exam room, and those lives are often filled with fear and anxiety because of what happens in the exam room)

- E. Develop sensitivity to the meaning embedded in the patient's experience (Wright had to understand his patient was happiest cuddling rather than walking the dog; Coulehan at the end of his poem sat down to learn about what all these migrating symptoms meant to his patient)**
- F. Develop self-awareness of our own psychological processes (Wright's self-congratulatory attitude toward his innovative therapy; Coulehan's recognition of his own aggressiveness; and Greenstone's confronting his fear and sense of impotence)**
- G. Not to be afraid to risk emotional connection and engagement with patients (which all three physicians do)**
- H. To remember that, your patients are suffering and, like Dr. Greenstone, you need to learn how to share some small measure of that suffering with them**
- I. To leave some space, as Dr. Selzer reminds us, for awe and mystery**

IX. Literature and Medicine elective