

Doctor doggerel

Can poems make you a better medic?

Medical educators are always experimenting with different ways to develop self aware, reflective, empathic, and compassionate doctors. One of these ways is poetry, which can help medical students by offering a unique method for re-examining self, others, and the world. The importance of poetry in medicine is increasingly being recognised. An international symposium will be held at Warwick University, UK, in 2011 (see www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/csri/research/cpt/poetry/symp/).

Why poetry?

Why should medical students take time to write a poem about their clinical experiences rather than polishing their case presentations for morning rounds?

Why should an overburdened medical student read a poem about medicine rather than a report on a double blind randomised controlled clinical trial? Although some medical school curricula include poems about medicine, and many medical schools publish original student poetry, not many medical students turn to poetry to better understand their profession. But poetry about going through medical education and the nature of doctoring can help students who feel isolated or are experiencing burnout.¹ It can provide insights into the socialisation process of medical education, and what practising medicine is about.

Doctor-poets

Well known doctor-poets



John Keats

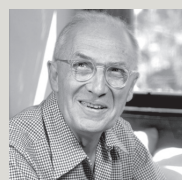
Some doctor-poets³ include John Keats (1795-1821), who gave up medicine at 21 and died from tuberculosis at 26; Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), a general practitioner known for his writings on anatomy; and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), a paediatrician who practised in a poor, immigrant area of New Jersey. Modern doctor-poets include: Dannie Abse (internal medicine and pulmonology); John Stone (cardiology); Jack Coulehan (internal medicine); Richard Berlin (psychiatry); Miroslav Horub (immunology); Peter Pereira (family medicine); Rafael Campo (internal medicine, infectious diseases); Marc Straus (oncology); Audrey Shafer (anaesthesiology); John Graham-Pole (paediatric oncologist); and Paula Tatarunis (internal medicine).



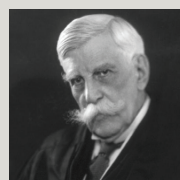
Audrey Shafer



Jack Coulehan



William Carlos Williams



Oliver Wendell Holmes

In 1994, one scholar estimated that since 1930, about 0.0019% of US doctors were also poets.² Few orthopaedic surgeons seem to be poets, but some may exist. Perhaps we should not ask which specialists write poetry, but whether more medical students should explore writing poems to see whether writing poetry might help them to become better doctors.

Poetry vs reflective writing

Writing poetry has a lot in common with reflective writing, which is already used in medical schools. Poetry can form a subset of students' reflective writing because it encourages them to reflect on their experiences. Poetry is unique because it encourages innovative use of language, propensity for metaphor, and attention to sound and rhythm—all of which help us to think about things in different ways. Reflective writing is invaluable to medical education,⁴ especially when guided by skilled feedback.⁵ However, it can become formulaic if professors' expectations of what constitutes a "good" reflection influences students to produce predictable essays, rather than writing what they think and feel.⁶ By valuing image and emotion over logical reasoning, poetry can be more transgressive than prose⁷; in other words, the logic required in much prose writing leads the mind along well worn paths, whereas a fresh metaphor or an unexpected feeling may show surprising facets of the event being written about. In this way, writing a poem may liberate the writer to think in ways they did not fully anticipate.

Themes in poems by students

In an analysis of almost 600 poems written by students,⁸ common themes included: becoming a doctor, the rewards and stresses of training, how medical school was changing the students, their relationships with patients, role models (positive and negative), death, students' personal lives, and occasionally the state of the world or the meaning of life. Students might explore such topics in poetry because they are not adequately dealt with in the curriculum yet students care about them, and they deserve thinking about.



The lab of anatomy

by Pouneh Nasseri

The lab of anatomy,
Has at times made me lose all my sanity
Has forced upon me acts of savagery
Has sometimes separated me from humanity

The lab of anatomy,
Has made me realize my life's reality
Has made me meet my own mortality
Has caused within me an epiphany

The lab of anatomy,
Is a study of my own complexity
Where I attempt to fathom the perplexity
And am left in awe by its majesty

Examples of poems by medical students

These poems illustrate a student's perspectives on anatomy, which simultaneously repels and inspires her (fig 1); a surgical resident's awareness of a struggle to reclaim and integrate all the aspects of her being (fig 2); a student's experience dealing with an alcoholic man, tempered by the devastating "foreknowledge" (knowledge that the doctor gains through medical expertise, but of which the patient does not know yet) that he also has a likely terminal cancer (fig 3); and a student's connection to and sense of helplessness towards a child who has lost a limb (fig 4).

Judging poems by medics

Literary merit might not be the most important factor to look at when analysing medics' poems. Ginnie Bolton, who has written extensively on using reflective and creative writing in medical settings, observes that "poetry does not have to be great so long as it is useful to the writer and to an appropriate audience."⁹ Although there are varying degrees of integrity, ability, technique, and originality in poetry by medical students, when they write about their experiences with patients, peers, and attending doctors, the results are moving, compelling, and impossible to ignore. Although this isn't literary merit, it is an argument for the value of such work.

The future of poetry in medical education

The Association of American Medical Colleges reported in 1998 that at least three quarters of US and Canadian medical schools offer some form of medical humanities.¹⁰ No hard data exist, however, on how many have incorporated poetry into their syllabus. Many professors enjoy including poetry in their teaching because it is short and can be quickly read (although it may take longer to understand).

Few studies have attempted to assess the effects of exposing medical students to poetry. In one qualitative study,¹¹ students read poetry and reported that doing so helped them to explore emotions, understand different perspectives, and improve self awareness. Participants speculated that such skills could lead to a better understanding of their patients' experiences of illness and therefore improved care. A second study¹² had students read four poems related to particular clinical stations, as part of an objective structured clinical examination at the end of their third year family medicine clerkship. About two thirds to three quarters of students indicated that the readings had either a moderate or a high effect on their treatment of patients, increasing empathy and decreasing levels of stress, with stronger effects in the areas of empathy and stress management.

Assessing results in the medical humanities is a complex and controversial topic.^{13 14} Opinions differ on how best to measure "narrative competence,"¹⁵ or the capacity to recognise, interpret, and be moved by patients' stories of illness,¹⁶ whether achieved through reading or writing poetry or exposure to other literature, and how best to link such competence to improved patient care. Research in this field is in its infancy, and it must be approached in ways that take into account the subjective nature of poetry and the need for demonstrable outcomes in medical education.

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The surgeon takes time off

by Meghann Kaiser

Like a teacup which
falls
and shatters
so far
in so many directions
It might take months
to reassemble
resemble
what I once was

This morning
the scent of perfumed
lotion
when I reached to
fasten
gold drop earrings
– a dress
orange, pink, and
white –
painted toenails
even

In the hall
I pause to consider
blistering new sandals
in my full length mirror
The soliloquy of my
undoing
stalls
when I consider
the thing(s) that I am



Dark star

by Brian McMichael

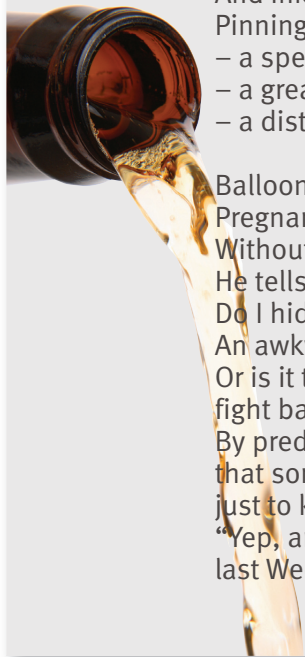
The unimaginable mass in his abdomen
Pushes mercilessly through his back
Passes instantly through the hospital bed
And inks into the center of the earth
Pinning him in position
– a specimen in a collection
– a great recumbent termite queen
– a distended and humbled Jabba the Hut

Ballooning
Pregnant like a blister
Without shame or irony
He tells me, “I try to drink a 12-pack a day.”
Do I hide my shock?
An awkward attempt at connection
Or is it that I’m trying to surprise him
fight back in the kisser
By predicting that he no longer gets a buzz
that some people drink like that
just to keep from getting the shakes
“Yep, and so I won’t hallucinate like I did
last Wednesday.”

In Labor-
ed breathing
We deliver him by
Caesarean invasion
Crossing the Rubicon into his homeland
by “tapping his belly”
Cause and Effect
Ascites fluid is clear and golden
The stream shooting in through the needle
Produces a startlingly nice head
Inside the sterile vacuum bottles

He is polite and grateful
Chatting easily about his
Interesting and lost career
We fastidiously capture his
Disturbingly milky elixir
Easy blame slips away

7 litres later
he breathes easier
while at the same moment
the other person in the room
his dark star child
begins to grow again
inside his belly



Johanna Shapiro is the author of *The inner world of medical students: listening to their voices in poetry*. Provenance and peer review: Commissioned, not externally peer reviewed.

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Poem for Jacob

by Sarah Mourra

You used to swim
gliding deep to the smooth pool floor
elegant,
holding your breath,
watching your boy shadow

the strange steel limb gone
left behind for the moment
in an empty locker room

Every morning your mother
puts a sock over that cold metal

A drawing of a red car
In crayon and marker
(you drew one wheel different
from the other)

Superheroes don't exist, you declare
matter of factly
They're so fake
When they fall, they get up right away
(you hate the sound of your body falling
steel hitting asphalt
You wish for streets and sidewalks of
soft silent carpet
Like here, you say

The only person in the world
that you've ever seen
who looks like you
(other than your cat who died)
was a man in line at McDonald's

He said
It's tough to take care of,
ain't it
Boy?

