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## medicine and the arts

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**H**ow is a patient like a poem?, I sometimes ask the medical students and residents I teach when I see glazed expressions that indicate they have fallen asleep with their eyes open. While I talk about how reading poetry helps us understand the experiences of patients and doctors, they sit there, politely enough, but no doubt wondering how they had the misfortune to wind up in this seminar. They thought that they had finished with English after freshman composition 101.

There is an initial stare of uncomprehending silence. I hasten to reassure them that I do not mistake people for texts, and that of course patients are not actually poems. (There is a slight collective sigh of relief, as though they are reassured I am not completely insane.) I am only speaking *metaphorically*, as a kind of imaginative exercise. The value of a metaphor, I remind them, is that by comparing two dissimilar things, we sometimes discover qualities about one or the other that previously has escaped our notice. Being good physicians-in-training, they are intelligent and inventive and, after their momentary shock, they are willing to play.

The answers I receive always surprise and delight me. Sometimes they are humorous. A patient is like a poem, explains one student, because reading a poem is usually over quickly, just like seeing a patient in the managed care health system. You have the feeling there is a lot more there, but the experience is over in a flash and it's time to move on. Another chimes in that patients are like poems because they both use an elliptical, indirect form of communication. An essay comes right out and says what it means in straightforward, rational prose, but patients and poems seem to beat around the bush, using indirection, allusion, and inference. Patients and poems both make you work—hard—to understand them. Another time a resident mentions that poems sometimes have “doorknob kickers,” just like patients. You think you understand what the poem is about, then in the last stanza or concluding couplet, it throws in a monkey wrench, an ironic twist, or a completely new piece of information. Patients can have the same frustrating tendency, mentioning their chest pain or shortness of breath just as the doctor is heading out the door.

There are more serious answers as well. One student, his eyes fixed on the table in front of him and not looking at any of his peers, says, “Poetry is lyrical, and within every patient is a song.” In a different session, a student expresses a similar idea. “Poems have something important to say. So do patients, if we listen to them carefully enough.” A third

student elaborates on this theme. “Poems are about meaning—the meaning of life and death. This is exactly what we have to understand about our patients . . . what their illnesses mean and what their lives mean.”

After this kind of discussion, it is a lot easier to read a poem together. Sometimes we read poems that are explicitly about patients, such as “Old Lady Patient” by Cortney Davis, who is both a poet and a nurse practitioner. In this poem, the content, structure, and tone all converge to give us deep knowledge of this patient. Initially, we see a cantankerous, complaining old woman in a hospital or nursing home. However, we quickly plunge into her loneliness, embarrassment, and helplessness precipitated by the rough, uncaring treatment of her physicians and nurses. In the concluding lines of the poem, her hostility is transformed through a simple act of caring.

Sometimes we read poems that, in their creation, probably had nothing to do with doctors and patients. An example of such a poem is the haiku by Basho, a seventeenth-century Japanese poet. In giving a talk to physical medicine and rehabilitation residents on professionalism,<sup>1</sup> I used this poem to illustrate the concept of mindful practice.<sup>2</sup> After reading the poem aloud, a resident commented, “The pond is the ancient wisdom of physicians, stretching back over centuries. The frog is the pain and suffering of the patient. We need to learn how to empathetically reverberate the patient's suffering, reflect their suffering while absorbing it with all our accumulated wisdom.” I had to pinch myself. How did he get to be so smart?

*How is a patient like a poem?* It is always a good question to ask. Inevitably, it leads to an even better question, *How is a person like a poem?* It is through this question that my students discover that poems are not just about patients or doctors—they are about the human condition.

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### REFERENCES

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## Haiku

By Basho (1644–94)

Breaking the silence  
Of an Ancient pond,  
A frog jumped into water—  
A deep resonance

The editors were unable to locate the original copyright holder of the haiku translation. Anyone with that information should contact the editorial offices of *Academic Medicine*.

## Old Lady Patient

By Cortney Davis

I hate  
doctors they  
do things to me  
and nurses have  
washrags of sand  
they put their hands  
down there, my face  
is red just  
saying it.  
Water!  
Bring me water!  
Hah, my throat.  
You look like  
my daughter nice  
give me  
your hand cool like  
water, your name?

“Old Lady Patient” is reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Details of Flesh* by Cortney Davis © 1997 (CALYX Books).

Lisa Dittrich, managing editor of *Academic Medicine*, is the editor of “Medicine and the Arts.” (Unsolicited submissions are welcome.)

## medicine and the arts

For medical students, mastering the art of the pelvic exam presents its own emotional and psychological challenges. In a situation of extreme physical intrusion, the medical student is encouraged to acknowledge only its normalcy. Standardized patients are now routinely used to guide students through the procedure, and to provide explicit feedback when students have been insensitive or rough. Nevertheless, adequately preparing young men and women to conduct such an intimate exam requires careful attention on multiple dimensions, psychosocial as well as mechanical.

In this context, even poetry can be a learning tool to help students apprehend aspects of the pelvic exam that standardized patients may have difficulty verbalizing. Recently, a group of first- and second-year medical students and I read two poems about the gynecologic exam as part of a module on the physical examination in an elective literature and medicine course. The poems offered moving insights into what that exam should and shouldn't be.

"At the Gynecologist's" by Linda Pastan presents the pelvic examination as "memento mori," a reminder of death. This poem helps students be aware that every medical scrutiny of our vulnerable human bodies, "contrived for pain," holds the potential to shatter "the dream of health" and bring us face to face with suffering and mortality. In this case, the physician's inhumane, heartless inspection of the patient only compounds her dread. The overwhelming experience of reading this poem is one of isolation, vulnerability, humiliation, and violation. The patient is excruciatingly alone, despite the doctor's presence, metonymically represented by "hands impersonal as wax." These seemingly disembodied hands, which only mimic flesh and blood, use both the patient's position (in stirrups) and the tools of the gynecologic trade (i.e., the speculum) to pry into her body. The patient regards herself as trapped, with no hope of escape. Her only option is to continue to "gallop towards death," which, in addition to the ever-present possibility of physical death, may also refer to a death of the spirit brought about by the dehumanizing experience of the exam.

Pastan's poem reminds the students that a "routine pelvic examination" can brutalize and devastate the patient when conducted in an unfeeling manner. Although reading this poem helps make students aware that the pelvic exam can evoke complex emotional issues for both patient and doctor, it also makes the idea of performing such an exam pretty scary. As a corrective to students' fear, we considered a second poem, "Riding Chaucer in the Stirrups" by Sophie Hughes.

While Hughes identifies issues similar to those described

by Pastan—vulnerability, isolation, violation—she also recognizes the ludicrousness of her physical predicament, and describes it with ironic humor ("examination of the in-nards"). In contrast to the cold, mechanical, lifeless physician in Pastan's poem, the physician in "Chaucer" is a living, breathing human being. In almost comradely spirit, the narrator addresses this physician directly in the second person ("you"). It quickly becomes clear that this pelvic examination is to be a joint project conducted mutually between patient and doctor.

Hughes' sympathetic physician knows that "the patient should be put at ease." At the moment of her greatest vulnerability to the geography and implements of his\* trade, he chooses to venture into her world—by declaiming a line of poetry! The results are gratifying. Although this physician "presses and probes," he does not "pry," suggesting that, given a humane context, patients can gracefully, even humorously, accept legitimate invasions of their bodily space. Eventually he "pats," a medically unnecessary but reassuring human gesture. Further, unlike the woman in "Gynecologist's," this patient is not a prisoner in the stirrups. The exam has a beginning and an end, and ultimately the patient is able to shed the "angel robe," with its intimations of death. In this exam, the rain of Chaucer's "Aprille showres" nourishes not the flowers of death referred to in Pastan's poem, but a "flour" of "vertu," in this case a truly good and virtuous doctor, whom the patient gratefully praises.

Students are left contemplating two equally powerful, but alternative images of the gynecologic exam. In one, the patient is isolated and depersonalized, the fearful burden of her mortality unrecognized by a callous gynecologist. In the other, patient and physician recite poetry together while the doctor performs the examination in a respectful, dignified manner. Although one literal-minded student worried about what would have happened if Hughes' doctor hadn't known any poetry, most understood the metaphor and the message: Avoid exploiting the power differential inherent in the gynecologic examination. Be careful not to unconsciously brutalize your patient or leave her emotionally abandoned in a state of vulnerability and discomfort. Instead, risk connecting in ways that recognize your patient's humanity and that are celebratory and joyful. It is in this way that medical students, indeed all physicians, can attain virtue in medicine.

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\*Although the gender of the physician is not clearly established, the quote from Chaucer uses the masculine pronoun.

## At the Gynecologist's

By Linda Pastan

The body so carefully  
contrived for pain,  
wakens from the dream of health  
again and again  
to hands impersonal as wax  
and instruments that pry  
into the closed chapters of flesh.  
See me here, my naked legs  
caught in these metal stirrups,  
galloping toward death  
with flowers of ether in my hair.

## Riding Chaucer in the Stirrups

By Sophie Hughes

Braced in that compromising position  
(feet in the stirrups, pelvis slid forward)  
my April ritual begins—  
examination of the innards.  
The patient should be put at ease,  
and so we speak of poetry.  
*I haven't studied it in years,*  
you say, feeling for fibroids.  
*In fact, I can recite only one.*  
*Let me . . . hear it,* I grunt  
between heavy pressings on my abdomen.  
You clear your throat,  
*Whanne that Aprille with his showres soote . . .*  
press and probe, press and probe  
*The Droghte of March hath perced to the roote,*  
I catch breath as the cool instrument  
zooms in for a cervical smear.  
*And bathed every veyne,* you pause, forgetting.  
I joyfully prompt you, . . . *in swich licour*  
You pat my tummy, indicating the exam is done.  
I sit up, pull down the angel robe,  
we join together in one more line,  
*Of which vertu engendered is the flour;*

Geoffrey, my good man, meet my *Doctour of Phisik;*  
*in al this world ne was ther noon hym lik.*

"At the Gynecologist's" is reprinted from *PM/AM, New and Selected Poems* by Linda Pastan © 1994 with permission of the publisher W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. "Riding Chaucer in the Stirrups" is reprinted from *JAMA* (vol. 274, no. 8, p. 672). © 1995, American Medical Association.

Lisa Dittrich, managing editor of *Academic Medicine*, and Anne Farmakidis, staff editor, are the co-editors of "Medicine and the Arts." (Unsolicited submissions are welcome.)