
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 innards"). 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.

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