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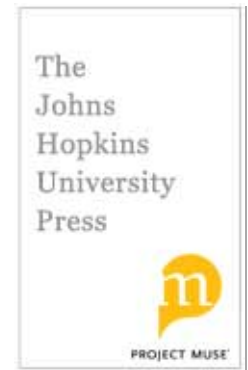
Medicine and Humanistic Understanding: The Significance of  
Literature in Medical Practices (review)

Johanna Shapiro

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## NOTES

1. Hawkins, "Medical Ethics and the Epiphanic Dimension of Narrative," 156.
2. Mathiasen and Alpert, "Lessons in Empathy," 136.
3. See McPherson et al., "Implementing Community-Based Systems of Services for Children and Youths with Special Health Care Needs," 1541.

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**Jerry Vannatta, Ronald Schleifer, and Sheila Crow.** *Medicine and Humanistic Understanding: The Significance of Literature in Medical Practice*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. DVD-ROM, \$39.95.

Literature and medicine have been inextricably intertwined since the time of the Greeks. Often, as in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's classic novel, *Frankenstein*, literature has been concerned with the idea that science and technology threaten medicine's humanistic heart. In the case of the DVD *Medicine and Humanistic Understanding: The Significance of Literature in Medical Practice*, we find technology in the service of literature and medical humanism, and it is a remarkably successful experiment, which enhances, enlivens, and inspirits the once-predictable academic text.

For the reader to fully appreciate the creativity and organization involved in the production of this DVD, I must expend a few words describing the resources it contains. The DVD is a fascinating combination of text (which can be both listened to and read); video clips of roundtable discussions with leading figures in the field of medicine and literature (Rafael Campo, Rita Charon, Anne Hudson Jones, Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, Oliver Sacks, Rich-

ard Selzer, John Stone, Abraham Verghese, and others—just the sort of people you would want to hear hold forth on literature-inspired topics); clinical role-plays and simulations; an extensive bibliography; and an extremely useful glossary. The material also includes chapter-by-chapter examinations for Continuing Medical Education credit. From a technical standpoint, the DVD is easy to use, even for a technically challenged person like me, and the chapter and section tables of contents make it simple to locate specific segments of interest. One can proceed in a linear fashion through the material, but it is also possible, indeed almost irresistible, to roam at will. The DVD encourages such adventurousness with links that facilitate instant exploration of technical terms in the text, refresh the viewer's memory about relevant points made in previous chapters, bring in pertinent expert voices through video clips, and highlight clinical relevance through role-plays and case histories.

As someone who enjoys curling up with a good book more than untangling the complexities of my computer, I found myself enchanted and enthralled by my experience with this DVD. The multimedia presentation of information is itself a sensory delight. The composition of the DVD is aesthetically pleasing, with agreeable illustrations and artwork, rich color schemes, and a satisfying variety of modalities. The text is easy on the eyes. The pop-up video clips are surprisingly unlike talking heads, perhaps because they are almost all quite brief, and I enjoyed putting faces and voices to authors whose work I had previously only read.

Yet no matter how technologically impressive and elegant the presentation, in the end, as with anything of value, it all comes down to substance. After the initial childlike enthusiasm for a new toy fades, we ask, Is the content worthwhile? Does it contribute anything to the field? I am pleased to say that, in this case, the material presented is substantive and well worth the viewer's time. Organized into six ample chapters ("The Patient-Physician Relationship," "The Patient's Story," "Doctors Listening to Patients," "Narrative and Medicine," "Narrative and the Everyday Ethical Practices of Medicine," and a concluding chapter that pulls together and applies the previous material in a brilliant analysis of Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*), each of which is divided into four to six subsections, the DVD provides a comprehensive treatment of key aspects of the relationship between narrative and medicine.

In my opinion, the level of analysis and interpretation is far from superficial. Even educators who have been working in the field for several years will learn much from this work. For example, the

discussion of the forms of narrative and their relationships to medicine is one of the clearest and most comprehensive I have run across. This presentation made me think about tragedy, comedy, melodrama, and irony and their inevitable appearance in the small daily dramas of medical practice and helped me understand why medicine so often favors melodramatic and comedic storylines. A term with which I was not familiar, "story filters," provided excellent insights into how different primary emotions of anger, fear, sadness, disgust, joy, and surprise (as well as influences of family, culture, and society) can help shape the stories of doctors and patients.

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Medicine and Humanistic Understanding* is that, despite its length and complexity, it presents a coherent, unified view of narrative in medicine. It is organized around the bold, yet obvious, assertion that at the heart of medical practice is the relationship between the stories of doctors and patients. The core of the DVD material, approached iteratively from a variety of perspectives and emphases, is the criticality of narrative knowledge, or the ability to apprehend "the meaningful whole" of any story—not just its details and facts but the overall sense that emerges from assembling these pieces in a way that honors their connections and meaning.

The DVD has many other assets, such as its emphasis on utility. Charon, among others, stresses the practical relationship between narrative knowledge and clinical action, emphasizing that the goal of this type of training is to enable medical students to act more effectively with their patients. In fact, narrative skill, then, is the ability to discern, reflect on, and be moved by the elements that combine to make up the meaningful whole of a patient's life and then take action rooted in empathy to act in ways that will benefit and even protect the patient. Contextually, the text consistently respects and honors patients' centrality in their own stories. Expert after expert reminds the viewer of the ethical components of narrative and points out that narrative analysis is not a technique so much as a process that patients and physicians must engage in with mutual respect and trust.

A work as ambitious as this will inevitably suffer minor flaws. Occasionally, links left me stranded, although with a modicum of thought it was always possible to discover my way back to the desired place in the text. In spots, the chapter on ethics seems somewhat basic and unimaginative, although the case for narrative ethics is built solidly and carefully; and a rejection of "neon ethics" (Hawkins) in favor of the small "housekeeping" ethical practices (Howard Brody) that constitute much of the daily practice of medicine is refreshing

and wholly appropriate to the interests and emphases of narrative. And finally, fair warning: At times the material can overwhelm. This is not a disc you can pop into your DVD player and expect to finish in a couple of hours. Its richness, complexity, and subtlety require a commitment of time and intellectual acuity on the part of the viewer. Despite these quibbles, *Medicine and Humanistic Understanding* is a unique experience that provides not only intellectual knowledge but also poignant moments of emotional engagement, such as listening to Verghese read from his autobiographical *My Own Country: A Doctor's Story of a Town and Its People*. Taken in its entirety, this DVD is, in fact, an exercise in phronesis or, as defined in the text, intellectual virtue informed by compassion, trustworthiness, and discernment brought to bear on uncertain matters (Hunter), such as the stories we tell each other about life, death, and everything in between.

—Johanna Shapiro  
University of California, Irvine