

TALKING POINTS: CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL THERAPIES

1. As director of program in medical humanities, I'm interested in how expressive and creative writing can be used by patients and physicians as a therapeutic adjunct to conventional treatment. Research suggests that writing deeply and honestly about traumatic events can improve physical and psychological wellbeing. Studies by James Pennebaker and colleagues show statistically significant changes in outcome variables from immune function to doctor visits, and the often-cited 1999 study by Smyth and colleagues published in JAMA of patients with asthma and rheumatoid arthritis concluded that personal writing was associated with positive changes on both functional and clinical parameters. The poem *Doctors* by Anne Sexton provides additional insights into the potential healing value of the creative act.
2. In her own life, Ann Sexton, a proto-feminist writer of the 1960s, struggled with many physical and psychological problems, and as many of you know, ultimately committed suicide in 1974. In this poem, the narrator reflects on the nature of doctors.
3. Several points are worth noting.
 - a. First is that, by the simple act of writing the poem, the traditional power relationship between doctor and patient is altered. Instead of the doctor gazing at and examining the patient, the patient gazes back and considers the doctor.
 - b. The poet's gaze is remarkably impartial and even-handed. She sees clearly the humanity of physicians, and credits them with both technical precision and gentleness, or in Jack Coulehan's memorable words, "steadiness and tenderness."
 - c. But, for all its fairness to doctors, the poem forces us, as readers, to hear and consider the patient's voice. She speaks to us as an equal, not as a "patient" in the most pejorative, regressive connotation of that word, but as an insightful and truth-telling sage.
 - d. Through writing, patients can express sentiments and observations that otherwise are often lost in the passivity and helplessness of the patient role. And the truth Sexton tells us is profound. After first wryly noting physicians' proclivity for claiming credit for all successful outcomes, and hiding away their mistakes, she sounds a cautionary note. In effect, she has assumed the authoritative voice of the physician, and, like most physicians, issues an order and writes a prescription. Doctors routinely chastise their patients – watch your cholesterol, watch your weight, watch your blood sugars. Sexton claims this posture metaphorically, and counsels her physicians, "Fear arrogance more than cardiac arrest."
 - e. The poem concludes with a wonderfully compelling image that lingers in the mind long after the last words fade. The poet uses the power of rhetoric, and the authoritative voice she has reclaimed, to persuade physicians in the direction of compassion and kindness. Be humble, she warns, because though you would like to be gods, you are only humans trying to fix up a human.

4. For the writer of such a poem, the healing potential lies in the possibility of recovering authority, knowledge, and respect. For the physician-reader of the poem, the healing potential lies in recognizing, accepting, and remembering the truth of its admonition.