

Can Poetry Make Better Doctors?

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I. INTRODUCTION

II. OBJECTIVES

A. Understand the rationale for using imaginative literature/ creative writing as tools for professional development

B. Describe how literature and writing can increase physician empathy for patients' experiences

C. Demonstrate how literature-based approaches can help develop problem-solving strategies for dealing with difficult doctor-patient encounters

III. What are Medical Humanities?

A. From an educational perspective, medical humanities are the incorporation of humanities-based teaching materials into medical school and residency curricula

1. Bioethics

2. History of medicine

3. Philosophy of medicine

4. Visual and performing arts

5. Literature, especially literature about doctors and patients, often written by doctors and patients

IV. STORIES IN MEDICINE

A. Medicine historically has always been about listening to the stories of patients

B. But today, surrounded by an explosion of information, biomedicine, and technology, squeezed by the pressures of managed care, we sometimes lose the story

V. WHY FICTION?

A. Even if we grant that it is important to find our way back to patients' stories, how can fiction help us?

B. Fiction written by doctors and patients generally emerges from "fact"

C. Sometimes fiction can give us insights and teach us truths that reality cannot

VI. SO WHY FICTION?

A. The craft of literature

1. Articulates insights, sentiments in ways that sometimes the rest of us, including our patients, cannot

2. Gives voice to what is submerged and suppressed (*the questions behind the questions*)

3. Defamiliarizes the familiar (helps us see familiar experiences in new ways)

- B. The assumptions and interests of literature in contrast to those of medicine**
 - 1. Goal is storytelling, not differential diagnosis**
 - 2. Emphasis is on character and relationships, not on treatment**
 - 3. Orientation is toward discovery of meaning, not problem-solving**
- C. The safety of literature**
 - 1. Literature as a transitional object –**
 - 2. The playpen effect**
 - 3. Child-like wonder and openness**
 - 4. Lack of clinical responsibility**

VII. WHAT IMPORTANT SKILLS CAN LITERATURE HELP US DEVELOP?

- A. Can encourage playful, imaginative, and creative thinking about patients**
- B. Can stimulate compassionate curiosity about and greater appreciation for patients**
- C. Can help us understanding of and empathy for the patient's situation**
- D. Can encourage us to risk emotional connectivity and engagement with patients**
- E. Can remind us of whole person understanding**
- F. Can help us learn the skill of close “textual” reading**
- F. Can remind us to reflect on, and learn from, experience**
- G. Can decrease feelings of frustration, irritation, anger, and helplessness toward patients**
- H. Can help us develop innovative strategies for patient interaction and management**

VIII. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DOCTORS AND POETS

- A. Struggle against mortality and death**
- B. Create order from chaos**
- C. Relief of suffering**
- D. Concern with healing**
- E. Combine emotional distance (steadiness) with emotional engagement (tenderness)**

The humanities has much to teach us about caring for our patients by caring about our patients (William Osler)