

LITERATURE AND MEDICINE

I. Why Turn to the Humanities?

- A. The T.S. Eliot questions – what has been lost in medicine?
- B. Truer than the truth (Old Folk Proverb)
 - 1. What does this mean?
 - 2. A good story or poem can give insights and truths that mere facts can't provide
- C. A good story
 - 1. reminds us to listen to the authentic voice and experience of the patient
 - 2. helps us see familiar experiences in new and creative ways
 - 3. counteracts cynicism and despair by reconnecting us with our fundamental values and a sense of awe and wonder

II. Patients Can Authentically Disclose What Their Illness Experiences Are Like

- A. The kingdom of the ill (Susan Sontag)
- B. "Chemotherapy"
 - 1. What is the experience of this patient?
 - 2. Stages of grief

III. Enlarging our Perspective

- A. Medicine is very good about teaching what the point is and how to stick to it
- B. Can learn a lot by not sticking to the point
- C. "Walking the Dog"
 - 1. Doctor looks at "old" problem in new way; learns something in the process
 - 2. Doctor prescribes pet; helps us think outside the box in terms of innovative therapies!
 - 3. Treatment doesn't work, at least not in the way he thought it would
 - a. Narrator (and readers) grapple with the fact that patients don't always do what doctors tell them to do
 - 4. In one final twist that shows truth truer than the truth, the poem conveys the value of doctor's caring and concern for patient

IV. Paying Attention to Values (Einstein quote)

- A. Doctors need to figure out every day "what should be" as well as "what can be"
 - 1. In the lives of patients, in illness, suffering, death
 - 2. In their own lives as well
- B. Literature can help explore values not just theoretically, but concretely, emotionally
- C. "I Stepped Past Your Room"
 - 1. Family physician examines a moral lapse -avoids entering room of dying patient
 - 2. By reflecting on his avoidance, on person of the patient, able to move past his own fears; finds solace in the courage of his patient
 - 3. Physician able not only to avoid abandoning patient, but to avoid abandoning himself
 - 4. Reconnect with deeply held values about what it means to be a physician

V. Mystery and Awe (Remen quote)

- A. Medicine is larger than science
- B. Life is larger than science

- C. Leave room in the practice of medicine for awe and mystery
- D. "Twisted Smile"
 - 1. Physician guilt over imperfection
 - 2. Physician humility/recognition no longer center stage
 - 3. Heroism of family member

VI. What Skills Can the Humanities Help Doctors Develop?

- A. Pay close attention to the richness, particularity, and nuances of patients
- B. Maintain empathy for multiple points of view in patient care
- C. Not to be afraid to risk emotional connection and engagement with patients
- D. Place patients within the context of their lived experience, rather than solely within the context of clinic or hospital
- E. Develop sensitivity to the meaning embedded in the patient's experience
- F. Acknowledge important role that creativity and imagination play in art of doctoring
- G. Develop self-awareness of one's own psychological processes
- H. Remember that patients suffer; obligation of physician to be willing to share some small measure of that suffering
- I. Leave space for awe and mystery