

PRESENTATION TO FREE CLINICS VOLUNTEERS

My thanks to Mariah and all of you for inviting me to speak with you this evening. My goal in coming here is to help you consider the important role that the humanities and arts can play in the education of physicians (and other health professionals).

I want to begin by saying something about this term – medical (or health) humanities. Medical humanities is a big umbrella that includes, literature (poetry, personal essays, stories), visual arts (including painting, sculpture, comics) and performing arts (such as theater, music, dance), bioethics, history of medicine some social sciences (such as medical anthropology, medical sociology and health psychology).

Medical humanities draws on these disciplines to study health and illness from a different perspective: to learn more about the patient's experience, the nature of the doctor-patient relationship, the importance of physician self-care, and how social justice and equity are implicated in healthcare.

To help you appreciate the value of the humanities, I'll make a somewhat simplistic analysis. Let's say that, broadly speaking, there are two ways of knowing things about the world: logico-scientific and narrative.

Logico-scientific knowing relies on facts, scientific evidence, replicable procedures, generalizability and leads to a biophysical understanding of disease. Skeletons: This is what logico-scientific knowing looks like.

Narrative knowing - Derived from reflecting on and sharing stories; How we make sense of experience; How we explore questions of suffering and meaning; leads to a more complex biopsychosocial/cultural/structural understanding of illness. Poem Anatomy Lesson: This is what narrative knowing looks like.

Narrative knowledge answers this question What is truer than the truth – a question that cannot even be asked from a logico-scientific perspective – and answers it with, a good story.

Some of the deeper truths we can learn through the study of medical humanities are these:

- **Pay close attention to the richness, particularity, and nuance of patients**
- **Acknowledge the important role that creativity and imagination play in medicine**
- **Maintain empathy for multiple perspectives in patient care**
- **Not to be afraid of emotional connection and engagement with patients**
- **Place patients in the structural context of their lives**

I want to take a deeper plunge into the importance of storytelling in medicine, and to do so I'm going to talk for a few minutes about a subset of medical humanities, Narrative Medicine.

Narrative medicine, as defined by the founder of this field, means the ability to critically understand and be moved by the patient's story. It involves paying close attention and engaging in close listening.

But there are different ways of listening to a story:

There is medical listening – listening for the signs, symptoms, evidence to make a differential diagnosis

There is also narrative listening – hearing the patient’s HPI as a story, a drama, a comedy, a tragedy, with characters, a plot, a beginning and ending.

It means listening with, as well as listening to, the patient’s story

Listening to involves extracting relevant information and discarding the rest

Listening with means being fully present for the story, respecting/not judging the teller

When you listen narratively, you can understand better why the patient is telling their story in a particular way; appreciate the whole person of the patient; develop an emotional connection with the patient; and even help them create a better story

Everything is held together with stories

So for the next half hour, we’re going to switch gears. In your work at the UCI Free Clinics, you’ve been privileged to receive many patient stories. I’d like you to think about some of the stories you’ve heard, and write them down. Think about these stories narratively. And if you only remember the medical aspects, try to fill in the missing pieces – use your imagination to wonder what this patient was like. Remember you are a character in the story as well, and possibly the attending too.

This is just a brief reminder that there are many forms of writing, and you can choose whatever is most comfortable for you.

Reflective writing is simply looking back on an event, and trying to represent it in a way that reveals its meaning or significance.

Point of view writing – adopting the point of view of the patient, or a family member, or attending – helps move you closer to that person because it is an exercise in seeing the world through their eyes.

Writing a letter to someone – even if you never give it to them – can be a powerful way of expressing thoughts and feelings, sharing gratitude or asking for forgiveness

Poetry emphasizes richness of imagery and language

Haiku (and Tanaka) are special short forms of poetry

Take the next 10 minutes and write something about a patient encounter that has stuck in your mind – because it was troubling, or uplifting, or in some way memorable. Then we will reconvene and if anyone is willing to share their writing, that would be wonderful. If not, we will spend a few minutes talking about what it feels like to write.