

STATEMENT

It is my great honor to join the Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences for this conference on health professions education. The theme of this conference – “Preserving the Human Connect...” – is dear to my heart because it embodies the core of what I have spent my entire professional life trying to advance. Medicine and other health professions are (or should be) all about humans connecting – doctors, nurses, RT, PTs, patients and families - ideally all working together with the goal not only of curing, but of healing those who are suffering.

Many forces in medicine and the health professions unfortunately work against achieving human-to-human connection. Some of these have to do with the economic underpinnings of most healthcare systems that, to satisfy financial bottom lines, prioritize productivity and efficiency over compassion and caring (regardless of mission statements and institutional rhetoric). Medical technologies, as this conference highlights, of course have been the driving force behind great medical breakthroughs that have saved millions of lives globally, but they also run the risk of separating the physician from the humanity of the patient. An often-cited example is that, before the invention of the stethoscope, doctors would place their ears against their patient’s chest; now, of course, the doctor is distanced from the patient by the length of the tubing. As this conference argues, our aim as health professionals should be to embrace all the benefits that technological advances provide while ensuring that we, as human beings, remain responsible for how we utilize technology and how we mitigate its dehumanizing effects.

In pursuit of this goal, over the past decades many medical educators, including myself, have realized that the humanities and arts offer valuable ways of helping us to remember our humanity and reconnecting us one to the other. The humanities and arts present us with different lenses through which to see and interpret the worlds of medicine, health, illness, and healing. Reading a poem about the death of a loved one or viewing a painting of a physician bending over an ill child prompt us to ask questions about the deepest nature of the healing arts, about the relationships doctors and other health professionals develop with patients and patients’ families, and about the intersection of healthcare practitioners, patients, and the larger society in which they function. The humanities remind us of the core values of service, compassion, and justice that led us to this profession in the first place.

I fully endorse the statement of the Medical Council of India and the AETCOM Module that attitudes can change behavior. Too often, medical education, in response to larger institutional and societal pressures, adopts an exclusively behavioral role toward teaching communication, ethics, and empathy. I fully endorse a skills-based approach that can serve to anchor inexperienced physicians and other health professionals. But unless such more “superficial” skills also are informed by deeply held, cherished attitudes and values, health professionals will have difficulty connecting with patients and families, especially under stressful, challenging clinical circumstances. The arts and humanities are well positioned to help us interrogate and nuance our beliefs, our assumptions to form an identity that reflects who we want to be personally and professionally.

The invitation to this conference quotes Guru Sishya as saying, “Let’s help our students by giving our best” and “I succeed in my purpose when my students excel.” As medical educators, we are concerned with helping the next generation of physicians and other health professionals to flower and flourish. The humanities and arts inspire us to ask ourselves, “What does my best look like?” and “What does it mean when my students excel?” When I ask myself these questions it is my exposure to art and

literature that makes me respond that my best, as well as the excellence of my students, includes kindness toward all and compassion toward suffering as well as technological competence and mastery. It should never be one or the other. The consummate health professional must learn to hold and promulgate both.

It appears to me that this conference is designed to provide great richness regarding the theory and practice of integrating arts and humanities in health professions education. Reviewing the conference brochure, I see workshops on poetry in healthcare, graphic medicine, theater of the oppressed, cinemeducation, history of medicine, poetry and narrative, painting/visual arts/photography/cartoons and much more. I realize how enthusiastically you have already embraced these dimensions of training and healing, how deep and wide-reaching your commitment to the humanities is, and what an exciting future lies ahead for further innovation, creativity... and human connection.

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