

LITERATURE: A HEALING ART

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By

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In March 1992 a three hour credit course entitled Literature: A Healing Art was given for the first time for 39 students who were in the Junior or Senior year of their medical education at the UMKC School of Medicine. During the month the students and the faculty shared a remarkable experience. The realization that physicians need to understand more about how patients view their illnesses and to discover true empathy for them was shared through stories such as A Worn Path by Eudora Welty, Indian Camp by Ernest Hemmingway, He by Katherine Ann Porter and others. I doubt that many of you have thought of these as medical writers, but their stories allowed us to focus on patients as persons and their needs for empathic understanding.

Later in the course we journeyed with Anton Chekov, the famous Russian physician-writer as he traveled all the way across Siberia to interview and write about Russian prisoners who were confined on the Island of Sakalin, a bitter and ugly Russian prison colony just north of Japan. It was hard to believe that this was the same writer who gave us wonderful short stories like Misery and famous plays like The Sea Gull which we also read and discussed. Also we shared in the agony and beauty of his death as told in a fictionalized account entitled Errand which was written by Raymond Carver who died of lung cancer not long

after writing the story. Carver was much impressed with the stories of the death of Chekhov from pulmonary tuberculosis as he himself was facing death from a pulmonary ailment. We also read a poem he wrote entitled My Death which is much different from other death poems particularly Dylan Thomas' "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" which is so often recommended for medical students' reading.

The class was introduced to the world history of plagues by studying Sophocles' play, Oedipus Rex, with its description of the Plague of Athens and the placing of the blame for its occurrence on someone's sinful behavior. Defoe's Journal of the Plague Year, written in 1665 about the plague in London, added another dimension to this panorama and was followed by the reading of Camus' simply told beautiful novel, The Plague. All of these stories prepared us to read a selection of modern Aids' literature—poignant poetry and short stories— and to watch together an award winning documentary about Aids, A Common Thread. This film details the lives of people who suffer from Aids and also those of their families and friends. Again the issue of placing of blame became part of our consideration and discussion.

The last week of this course started with The Death of Ivan Ilych, Tolstoy's classic description of one man's struggle with a fatal illness and his inability to communicate with his family, his physicians and his friends. This was compared to a more modern story by Tillie Olsen called Tell Me A Riddle in which a woman struggles through her terminal illness, always seeking empathy

and understanding and finding it finally from a granddaughter who is the only one able to communicate with her suffering grandmother and her equally suffering grandfather.

You may wish to ask whether the study of this literature made a difference to these students. From their journals, essays, stories and poetry it was evident to me that a portal had been opened which allowed many of them to feel with the characters in the stories, with patients they had helped care for and with their own life experiences. I suspect that many events which were described in their writing had never before been shared and hopefully the sharing gave the writers an expanded view of the privilege and value of the life of health care giver.

I would like to quote from one student's course evaluation:

"This class allows medical students to experience birth, death, dying, illness, conflict and other crucial moments in human experience in a totally different light. It has allowed us to bring more meaning, clarity and emotion to these events, as they affect not only ourselves but others, including our patients. Literature has given many students a broader perception and greater empathy with regard to the experiencing of life crises and clinical scenarios, but at the same time has allowed detachment from real life and an escape into literature. The class has been a source of enrichment and a welcomed diversion from the weighty and burdening tasks of medical school."

This type of course has now been repeated three times and a new group started on just such a literary journey on June first. This will be a somewhat different journey because these are students just beginning their clinical experience. We'll be reading Frankenstein by Mary Shelley and a modern counterpart, Jurassic Park, by Michael Crichton as well as a sampling of short stories and poetry written by several well known American physician-writers. A student who took the March course and will be starting a Surgery Residency in July has volunteered to lead a discussion of the writings of Richard Selzer, a surgeon-writer. The ^{se} _^ students too will be asked to write about their responses to these pieces of literature and about their personal experiences.

In October of this year we will be offering our first Continuing Medical Education Humanities in Medicine Conference. This will be during an Alumni weekend when we hope to attract many of our graduates as well as other interested persons. Participants will be asked to read several selections before coming. Included will be works by Anton Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, Richard Selzer and Ernest Hemmingway. In addition to discussions of these literary works there will be sessions on art, including one about the strange illness of ^{the artist Vincent} _^ Van Gogh.

When I recently attended the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians in Washington D.C. I was able to include in my selections for attendance two on Literature and Medicine. One of these was developed around a discussion of

two works related to problems of adolescent boys, Paul's Case, a short story by Willa Cather and Catcher in the Rye by J.D. Salinger. Another concerned a very unusual short story, A Simple Heart by Gustave Flaubert and resulted in a very lively discussion at 7:30 on Saturday morning.

I'm sure many of you have noted a new kind of writing in the medical journals which you read. On Being A Doctor in the Annals of Internal Medicine includes personal experience stories submitted by physicians and a similar section in the JAMA is called A Piece Of My Mind. In the Journal of General Internal Medicine such stories are published under the title of Reflections. I would encourage all of you to take notice of these shared medical and personal experience stories and perhaps to submit writing of your own. Students in our Medicine and Literature classes have found these stories interesting and inspiring. Dr. Rita Charon, an internist from New York City who is working on a PhD in Literature, has extended an open invitation to any physician to send her manuscripts or ideas for manuscripts for review or suggestions. She led our discussion of the short story, A Simple Heart, at the ACP meeting.

In preparing these descriptive remarks about my Literature and Medicine experiences I felt it would be worthwhile to tell you a little about the development of interest in these areas and how this movement has come to be a valuable part of medical humanities education. Perhaps in this way I can best encourage you to personally consider literature as a healing art.

The first full time department of Medical Humanities was

initiated at Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine at Hershey, Pennsylvania in 1966 with a theologian as its director. By 1972 there were 10 medical humanities teaching programs in the United States and they included primarily studies in theology, philosophy and ethics. Literature gained acceptance into such programs at a much later date. The first issue of the Journal of Literature and Medicine was published in 1982 and the editor noted that it was designed to explain, probe and illustrate the nature of the strange marriage between literature and medicine. The first issue contained articles written by professors of English, Behavioral Science, Philosophy and Religion in addition to some written by physicians from disciplines as diverse as Surgery and Psychiatry.

The journal has been very successful and is now in its 11th year with an expansion to 2 issues per year. Departments of Medical Humanities, some of which include faculty members in literature, have been established in many medical schools and there is now a Center for Literature, Medicine and the Health Care Professions at Hiram, Ohio. It is a collaborative project of Hiram College and Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine.

I had the privilege of participating as a Fellow in the second NEH sponsored program in Literature and Medicine at the center in 1991-92 and I will be returning there for a week-long course in Narrative Ethics in August of this year. This has allowed me to become acquainted with a wealth of relevant literature and a circle of valuable friends who share my interest in

and love of literature. We have learned what a contribution reading and discussing literature of many kinds can make to our lives as physicians, as teachers, as members of families, as friends and as citizens of our world. We usually begin talking about a novel or a poem but we often come around to discussing our own lives. We don't intend this; it just happens.

Since physicians and writers are both especially observant of the joys and tragedies of human existence it seems natural that medicine and literature should come together with mutual benefit for those in both fields of endeavor. Physicians and writers usually observe for different purposes. Physicians are taught to discern, classify and treat illness. Writers traditionally describe, clarify and interpret. Caring for patients often requires both a detachment from and an attachment to life stories. The study of literature can supply both and can give physicians a broader perception of such stories and hopefully a greater empathy for patients and a better understanding of themselves.

Finally and perhaps most important for all of us is that literature has intrinsic worth for everyone as a source of enrichment of life and diversion from the weighty tasks of every day. Who in this room hasn't felt saddened, inspired, uplifted or encouraged at some time after reading just the right story or poem? Literature is itself a healing art: healing all of us—physicians, patients and writers alike.