

MEDICAL HUMANITIES REPORT

MEDICAL HUMANITIES PROGRAM

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On the Teaching of Literature and Medicine

In the family of disciplines that constitute the larger field of medical humanities, the study of literature and medicine is clearly a younger sibling, more recent in origin and at present less fully developed than its kindred disciplines of medical ethics or the history of medicine. However, signs of disciplinary maturation within the study of literature and medicine have become increasingly visible in recent years, ranging from courses in medical and pre-medical curricula to a journal dedicated specifically to articles on literary dimensions and explorations of medical issues (1). Another sign that literature and medicine is growing into a well-defined, independent field of inquiry is the fact that more and more people are beginning to formulate appropriate methodologies and theories for thinking, teaching, and writing about it.

An example of this move toward greater mindfulness of method and underlying principles took place last fall, when the University of Connecticut Health Center sponsored a conference titled "Literature and Medicine: A Conference of Teachers." With the support of the MSU Ethics and Humanities Program and Interdisciplinary Program in Health and Humanities, I was able to attend this conference. The content of its various sessions indicated both the distance already traversed in the disciplinary growth of literature and medicine, and the distance still remaining to be travelled. The conference, which drew some 85 registered participants, focused on six distinct contexts for the teaching of literature and medicine: the undergraduate curriculum; the first two years of medical school; the clinical years of medical school; residency; practicing physicians; and Ph.D. programs in medical humanities.

Because the ratio of physicians to literature teachers in the audience was approximately 2 to 1, and perhaps also because of the medical center's sponsorship of the conference, the emphasis of the six plenary presentations on pedagogical methods fell primarily on the uses of literature in the lifelong education of medical professionals. Besides the plenary sessions, the conference organizers arranged for a variety of small workshops, each dealing with specific pedagogical techniques or topics and works that might be taught in courses on literature and medicine.

Much of the conference was very stimulating--perhaps most notably its organizers' decision to stress the value of literary ways of knowing at all stages in a physician's career. If literature and medicine is to reach its full potential as a field of study, it needs to be made available and pertinent for medical personnel of all degrees of experience. It certainly should not be something required only in a pre-medical program, or only in medical school, and then simply left behind as a classroom exercise that becomes irrelevant once one enters the "real world" of hospitals, patients, and practice.

For example, the Mayo Clinic's Insights Series has been inviting practicing physicians to attend one-or two-actor dramas or dramatic excerpts, bringing in major actors in powerful plays that deal with medically-related problems--plays like Marsha Norman's 'Night, Mother or Eugene O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh. After each performance, the audience is invited to talk about the medical issues touched on in the play in light of the full range of human affect explored by the text and the performers they have just seen./2/