



Poetry in Medicine: oblivious to the obvious

Sheraz Jamal Khan^{✉ 1}

ABSTRACT

Medicine is a science that is deeply intertwined with the emotional, psychological, cultural and social aspects of human life. Poetry has almost a similar domain. In recent years, poetry has emerged as a powerful tool to bridge the obvious gap between the clinical objectivity of medicine and the expectations of patients and healthcare professionals. Poetry can and must enhance empathy, trust, respect, communication, and emotional understanding in medical practice. This offers both clinicians and their patients a simple and cost effective way to process complex emotions. By incorporating poetry into medical education and practice one can improve patient care and clinician well-being.

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I: Department of Medicine, Medical Teaching Institution Hayatabad Medical Complex, Peshawar, Pakistan

Email[✉]: shiraz.jamal@me.com

Contact #: +92 345 8590900

showed increased levels of empathy and emotional awareness, compared to their peers who did not participate in such exercises.¹ These findings show the importance of integrating the fine arts and literature into medical curricula to complement formal training. This would diversify the interaction with the patient and would patch the divide between patient and physician and illness and cure.

INTRODUCTION

In this sterile, data-driven, statistical world of modern medicine, where human beings are numerical values. Life, death, morbidity and mortality are nothing but statistical variables. Human beings serve as systems and areas of anatomy and physiology. Most, if not all decisions are often dictated by metrics, guidelines, and algorithms. The human experience can sometimes feel neglected in the era of robotics. The unfathomable expansion of artificial intelligence is going to harm it further and human beings are to suffer. We are on the crossroads when machines are taking over. Soon, if not very soon machines are going to treat us and not very empathically. Homo sapiens may be redundant as the Frankenstein is going to take over his creator. Till that time, at the heart of every medical encounter lies a deeply personal narrative: one of hope, fear, loss, or recovery. Happiness and sorrow are two sides of the same coin in medicine. Poetry has its nuances and has the ability to capture the complexities of human emotion. It provides a deeper insight into much more complex matters than logical reasoning can explain. Medicine is all about logic. Poetry has a more philosophical lens to observe the intricacies of human behaviours and emotional makeup. While evidence-based medicine focuses on physical health, poetry addresses the emotional wellbeing.

History has revealed that physicians

have turned their back on medicine to pursue a career in poetry. They have tried to articulate the nuances of their profession. People like William Carlos, John Keats, and recently Rafael Campo have been in medical practice with poetic expression. John Keats wanted to be a surgeon till he said: "I find that I cannot exist without poetry". He never lived even with poetry for long. During his short lifetime, he gradually came to see poetry as his true calling, a life-enhancing alternative to the limited resources of contemporary medicine. Medicine in his time was limited, human mind was not.

The role of poetry in medical education:

Medical education has traditionally emphasized on the acquisition of scientific knowledge and technical skills. Recently however, there is a shift towards a holistic approach to medical training. Medical educators, teachers and researchers recognize the importance of soft skills like empathy, active listening, and communication. Poetry, arts and music introduced in some medical schools, serves as an essential tool for developing these soft skills. By reading and writing poetry, medical students learn to appreciate the emotional and psychological dimensions of patient care. This way they are better equipped to foster emotions and give back what the patient deserve and what they actually seek.

A 2001 study revealed that physicians who engaged with poetry, read literature and did reflective writing

The healing power of poetry for clinicians and patients:

Healthcare professionals often face burnout, emotional exhaustion and compassion fatigue due to the stressful job they have at hand. Poetry offers a refuge, at times a La-La land allowing clinicians to express and process their own emotions. They for a moment are relieved and find tranquility in the lap of poetic metaphors. Oblivious of the truth, they usually survive the worst things that could bring them down or even break them down emotionally otherwise. When they come out of the dream like state they can relate to the pain of losing a patient or the joy of witnessing recovery without having a lot of emotional disturbance. Writing and reading poetry can serve as a form of self-care. This helps doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers to reflect on their experiences and maintain emotional resilience.²

Poetry also provides an opportunity to the patients to communicate those feelings that may be difficult to articulate in conventional dialogue. It allows patients to reclaim their voice in a clinical environment where they often feel helpless if not hopeless. Narrative medicine, which incorporates patient storytelling, has demonstrated the value of this approach, helping to foster deeper patient-physician connections and improve outcomes.^{3,4} By bridging the divides that separate physicians from patients, themselves, colleagues,

and society, narrative medicine offers fresh opportunities for respectful, empathic, and nourishing medical care.

Contemporary initiatives and the future of poetry in medicine: In today's changing world, initiatives such as the Pulse project at Columbia University and The Poetry of Medicine workshops are integrating poetry into medical practice and education. These programs promote the use of poetry as a means of reflection and communication for both patients and practitioners.^{5,7} The success of these initiatives indicates that poetry could play an essential role in medicine, not just as a luxury but as a vital aspect of care.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating poetry into medicine recognizes the full human experience in healthcare. It helps both patients and clinicians cope with emotional challenges, fostering understanding and

compassion. This shift promotes a more humanistic approach, acknowledging that medicine is both science and art.

We should advocate for poetry's inclusion in medical training, hospitals, and patient care, focusing on healing not just the body, but also the human spirit.

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KMUJ web address: www.kmu.edu.pk

Email address: kmu@kmu.edu.pk