

Chapter 16

Medical Humanities

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ABSTRACT

Medical Humanities (MH) provide a contrasting perspective of the arts to the ‘science’ of medicine. A definition of MH agreed upon by all workers is lacking. There are a number of advantages of teaching MH to medical students. MH programs are common in medical schools in developed nations. In developing nations these are not common and in the chapter the author describes programs in Brazil, Turkey, Argentina and Nepal. The relationship between medical ethics and MH is the subject of debate. Medical ethics teaching appears to be commoner compared to MH in medical schools. MH programs are not common in Asia and there are many challenges to MH teaching. Patient and illness narratives are become commoner in medical education. The author has conducted MH programs in two Nepalese medical schools and shares his experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Science is at the heart of modern medicine. The technique of scientific experimentation and subjecting treatments to modern scientific enquiry has resulted in significant advances in modern medicine. The shortcomings of a medical culture dominated by scientific, technical and managerial approaches however, were recognized in the 1960s and 1970s (Greaves & Evans, 2000). This

lead to an increased focus on the ‘human’ side of medicine and on subjects traditionally considered as the humanities. In the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK) medical sociology, social history of medicine and medical ethics emerged as academically respectable disciplines.

At the end of this chapter the reader will:

- a. gain a broad idea of what are the Medical Humanities (MH)
- b. understand the advantages of teaching MH to medical students

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- c. be introduced to a selection of MH programs in developed countries
- d. know about MH programs in developing nations
- e. explore connections between medical ethics and MH
- f. gain an overview of MH in the Asian context
- g. know about the author's experiences with MH modules and
- h. be familiar with possible challenges and future directions for MH in developing nations.

WHAT ARE THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES?

Workers do not agree about what constitutes the Medical Humanities (MH). Dr. Kirklin from London, England, an international expert in MH defines it as 'an interdisciplinary, and increasingly international endeavor that draws on the creative and intellectual strengths of diverse disciplines, including literature, art, creative writing, drama, film, music, philosophy, ethical decision making, anthropology and history in pursuit of medical educational goals' (Kirklin, 2003). MH has the objective of helping learners to be good physicians. Another definition states MH as the application of the techniques of reporting, interpreting and theorizing developed by traditional humanities fields to phenomena within the traditional medical field (Evans, 2002). The humanities include subjects like history, literature, philosophy, ethics, anthropology, sociology, theology, psychology and others which explore the world as it appears from the point of view of frail, flesh-bound, human experience (Evans, 2002). MH are just those same subjects/studies concerned with the specific experiences of health, disease, illness, medicine and health care, the practitioner–patient relationship and, above all, the clinical consultation as an arena for human experiences (Arnott et al., 2001).

MH involves the human experiences of medicine seen through the humanities and reflected philosophically (Evans, 2002). An author states that the debate should be less about which disciplines to include and be more about the human experience of medicine (Coulehan, Belling, Williams, McCrary & Vetrano, 2003). Recently experts in the field of MH have tried to arrive at a pedagogical definition (Shapiro, Coulehan, Wear & Montello, 2009). According to these authors, MH teaching activities share several characteristics. They use methods from various humanities disciplines to investigate various aspects of medicine and healthcare practice. Health profession students are taught to better understand and critically reflect on their professions. It is intended that they become more self-aware and humane practitioners. The activities are interdisciplinary. An editorial states that MH does not fit into the traditional boundaries of disciplines and subjects but is a perspective whose concern is what it means to be 'fully human' (Greaves & Evans, 2000). MH supports the exploration of the human side of medicine and encompasses the intersection of the arts and medicine (Hooker, 2008).

WHY TEACH MEDICAL HUMANITIES TO MEDICAL STUDENTS?

MH can have both instrumental and non-instrumental functions in a medical school (Hooker, 2008). Instrumental functions are those which have a direct bearing on the daily work of doctors while non-instrumental functions lead to general education, personal development and new methods of thinking (Macnaughton, 2000), (Skelton, 2000). Nearly two decades ago, Professor Downie had suggested four types of connection between literature and medicine (Downie, 1991). One type benefits literature, the second provides entertainment and relaxation, the third provides insight into the standing of professions in the public perception and the fourth provides glimpses

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