Humanities: Literature and Medicine

Course Director

Claudia DeShay, PhD, Library

Rationale

This course explores the potential of literature to heighten our sensitivity to the personal side of such medical issues as disease, pain, trauma, and care of the dying and about such issues as the stigma society attaches to disease, our perceptions of doctors, and the experience of death. Today's scientific, technological approach to medicine can prolong life and heal complex illnesses. But many of us, doctors and patients alike, yearn for a more holistic approach that can treat the entire person, not just the body. We will explore how the lessons of art can be applied to deepen and enrich the science of medicine and create a more humanistic approach to healthcare. This six-part course examines the potential for literature to bridge the gap between the empirical and humanistic approaches to medicine to heighten our sensitivity to personal issues of disease, pain and suffering, and, ultimately, death.

Disease can never be understood satisfactorily as simply a biological phenomenon; disease always carries cultural implications. We label and stigmatize diseases in various ways and pass judgment on the people who suffer from them. This notion of disease as "punishment" or "curse" is an ancient one. This belief is still present today in the perception that people develop certain diseases because they have "lived the wrong way" or have certain personality types. Literature has done much to create and influence our views of doctors, the doctor-patient relationship, and illness and the role of the doctor. Literature also enables us to examine the experience of death from a variety of perspectives: that of the person who is dying, of the family or loved ones, of the doctor, and even of the passing stranger.

What are the practical applications of the lessons of art for the practice of medicine? Students will discuss ways in which the lessons from literature can be applied to their medical practice and work on a writing project that may introduce them to the healing power of storytelling. An understanding of the way illness is portrayed in art might help the profession deal better with some of its fundamental problems: a reluctance to admit mistakes, the personal and family problems doctors often experience, and the multiple roles that doctors are expected to play: healer, psychologist, priest, God.
Objectives

1. Develop awareness and understanding of the presentation of medical issues in literature (and film).
2. Develop critical skills in analyzing insights literature provides into the medical profession, particularly from the patient’s perspective.
3. Develop an understanding of “story-telling” as an essential theme of illness and the literature of illness.
4. Develop skills of “story-telling” in conveying medical information.

In addition, this elective will help foster the following competencies among medical students as established by the AAMC in its 1998 Medical School Objectives Project:

1. Development of honesty and integrity in all interactions with patients' families, colleagues, and others with whom physicians must interact in their professional lives;
2. The capacity to recognize and accept limitations in one's knowledge and clinical skills, and a commitment to continuously improve one's knowledge and ability;
3. The ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, with patients, patients' families, colleagues, and others with whom physicians must exchange information in carrying out their responsibilities;
4. Knowledge of important non-biological determinants of poor health and of the economic, psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the development and/or continuation of maladies.

Format

- Small group discussion
- Six two-hour sessions (Thursdays, 4-6PM)
- Minimum class size will be 5 students, and the class will be capped at 15 students.
- Class location: E3.314E

Student Evaluation

Grades will be pass/fail. Attendance is required to receive credit for the course.

Course Evaluation

Grading will be pass/fail. To receive transcript acknowledgment, students must:
- attend 5 of 6 sessions
- complete the online course evaluation form
Schedule

Session 1 (Thursday, February 12)
Introduction: Introductions, Class Objectives
The Patient-Practitioner Partnership

Session 2 (Thursday, February 26)
Medicine and Human Suffering

Session 3 (Thursday, March 5)
Dignity and Compassion

Session 4 (Thursday, April 9)
Clinical Uses of Narrative and Poetic Medicine

Session 5 (Thursday, April 23)
Spirituality & Medicine

Session 6 (Thursday, April 30)
The Call of Stories