

EDUCATING THE HUMANE PHYSICIAN: THE ROLE OF MEDICAL HUMANITIES

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ABSTRACT

The previous and present centuries witnessed the tremendous strides in medicine. Modern diagnostic procedures, advanced therapeutic modalities and modern, novel and safer drugs and surgical procedures benefited greatly the whole of mankind in general. As a result of these benefits from modern medicine, normal life span increased and people were able to enjoy life better and longer. Doctors themselves are now better trained due to the modern discoveries, the modern technology at their disposal and the advanced and novel methods in medical education.

However, together with these progress in the science of medicine, there is now a growing dissatisfaction and mistrust of patients of their physicians. There has been a noticeable detachment of doctors from their patients; the traditional patient-doctor rapport is slowly being eroded. Too much reliance on technology in the absence of sound clinical judgment is partly a reason for this, among many others. What is even more alarming is the noticeable decline in empathy and the increase in cynicism among medical students as they progress through medical school and residency. The lack of observational and communication skills, deficient sensitivity to patients' emotions all lead to a physician without empathy.

The medical humanities as a discipline in medical education was introduced several decades ago to address this issue. Many medical schools in Europe, United States and Asia had integrated the course in their medical curricula. There are various methods in introducing the discipline to medical students; different approaches are being utilized. Basically, the courses included are literature, poetry, visual arts, music, film, theatre, as well as the social sciences like medical anthropology, sociology as well as philosophy, history and ethics. Through these wide area of non-medical fields of study, the medical student could develop better observational skills, analyze human situations sometimes unfamiliar to them, communicate better in a more humane way to patients and better understand and interpret human emotions. All these qualities point to a more humane physician.