

Teaching Bioethics through Literature

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Abstract

At this institution, where we provide care to nephrological and urological disorders and manage to perform related donor kidney transplants, we have a school for medical technology. Previously we presented and published our experience of designing curriculum and teaching bioethics to students of this school.(1) Further on we want to share our experience of teaching through humanities to same group of students who are getting B.S. degree in one of 5 categories, which includes haemodialysis, operation theater technicians, radiology technicians, laboratory technicians, and intensive care technicians. We offer different lectures from classical humanities disciplines (history, philosophy, comparative religion, literature), and the social sciences (cultural anthropology, sociology, political theory and public policy). The lectures contextualize medicine as a profoundly human activity, and invite students to consider what health care providers are, and what they do in a broad social, cultural, political, and intellectual context. Students explore the interrelationships among ethics, literature and medicine and acquire the theoretical framework to analyze ethical dilemmas common in clinical practice. Sometime we use a short movie or small piece of literature, prose or poetry, and let students lead discussion on issues addressed in that particular movie or piece of literature. Teaching bioethics to this group of people who are involved in patient care, in one way or other, is an important task and using different modalities to make the subject more interesting is the goal of study.

Keywords: Bioethics, Medical Technologists, Humanities, Literature, Arts

Introduction

General introduction to institution, its technology school, targeted groups of students, status of teaching programs in ethics previously described in details.(1) Here we aim to share our experience of teaching these students; ethics through literature.

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The need for reviewing current state of training in ethics and public health especially in developing world was felt which resulted in revising previously designed curriculums at different levels for health care providers. The value of literature to public health education exploring interdisciplinary connections between legendary understanding of medical knowledge and practice are the aim to be highlighted in this article.

Differences between developed and developing nations, in terms of financial, economic, environmental and health-related resources, are dramatic. A huge number of people lack access to clean drinking water and adequate sanitation services. Tens of thousands of children die every day from malnutrition and disease like malaria and diarrhea. Large number of women die during childbirth. This wide gap of resources provision between poor and rich has been addressed in literature both from east and west. (examples below)

Literature (poems, essays, short stories, and novels) has been integrated into many medical curricula. In general, students have responded enthusiastically to the addition of literature to the medical school curriculum. (2)

Some specific examples are:

- George Orwell's essay "How the Poor Die" (3), in which he described being treated for pneumonia in Paris in a hospital for the poor in 1929.
- Anton Chekhov's short story "Ward Six" (4) offer timeless descriptions of the dreadful conditions which can be found in inadequately-funded public hospitals. Chekhov was himself a physician and wrote many short stories and plays, he is considered one of Russia's greatest playwrights. Chekhov contracted tuberculosis in 1884, and died in 1904.
- The winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Doris Lessing, in "An Old Woman and Her Cat," (5) a short story about a woman's gradual drift outside the limits of society provides a moving fictional entrée into the world of society's dispossessed, through its description of the daily struggles of an aged gypsy and her adopted alley cat trying to cope with life on the streets of London. An old woman, when her husband dies, and her children leave home, she embraces a marginal, unconventional existence, accompanied by her faithful cat. 'An Old Woman and Her Cat' brilliantly combines Doris Lessing's unforgiving examination of our society – and those it cannot accommodate and ultimately fails – with a wonderful portrait of her favorite animal – the cat.

- In William Carlos Williams' brief tale, "The Insane," (6) a young pediatrician shares with his physician-father his frustration over the long-term effects on a child's mental health of witnessing violence and of emotional neglect.
- Judy Schaefer, A nurse, from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, United States, wrote this poem, which was used in a session:

Broken Heart

You have opened up my heart
 and now sponge mop the rivets of red blood
 And count each sponge as testimony to the pain.
 You had talked of a bypass
 exits and egress, yield
 I imagine a busy expressway whirling around all of St. Louis
 up to Chicago and down to Memphis
 I wonder about the space in my chest.
 The counting and the keeping of score
 continues into the darkest hours of morning.
 I wake up breathing
 and know that this pain was not true love.

- Rabindranath Tagore; who is a Nobel Laureate in literature, his poem from a collection "I Won't let you Go" was used in a session.

Go not to temples to put flowers upon the feet of God,
 First fill your own house with the fragrance of love
 Go not to temple to light candles before the altar of God
 First remove the darkness of sin from your heart

Go not to temple to bow down your head in prayer,
 First lean to bow in humility before your fellow men

Go not to temple to pray on bended knees,
 First bend down to lift someone who is down trodden ..

Go not to temple to ask for forgiveness for your sins,
 First forgive from your heart those who have sinned against you

- Faiz Ahmed Faiz; a local renowned poet, one of his poem, which was visualized by a lyrical group (Laal band), was used during a session, and a prolonged discussion was generated.

Useful selections for sessions relating to partition (Indo-Pakistan 1947) are Krishan Chandra's published short story, "A Letter from a Prostitute, (addressing to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohammad Ali Jinnah)" (7) which portrays the horrors of partition and excoriates the hypocrisy of those who pray for victory in that situation; Saadat Hasan Manto's short story, "Khol Do" (8) which describes the harrowing experience of a seriously affected father of a young beautiful lady.

Literature can be incorporated into the medical school curriculum in numerous ways. Small group discussion sections constitute an ideal venue for the discussion of literary works, which can be taught alongside articles from the medical and public health literature. Using short pieces of selections from literature, on ward rounds to help students and residents better comprehend the socio-cultural, economic, religious, and personal factors that contribute to health and affect one's response to illness can improve our insight into patients' lives, and ideally increase our empathy.

Writing assignments can also be valuable, especially when students are able to share their essays with mentors and colleagues. In our experience students were assigned tasks to write down real patient's stories in short and highlight moral issues in those stories. Opportunities for students to write about formative experiences in medical school (e.g., critical incident reports) have been shown to be valuable in facilitating personal growth and development.

The medical profession has made important contributions to the literary standard, through the works of Anton Chekhov, Somerset Maugham, William Carlos Williams, Francois Rabelais, Thomas Campion, John Keats, and contemporary doctor-writers like Lewis Thomas, Dannie Abse, and Richard Selzer from the west and Shafiq ur-Rehman, Shershah Syed, Asif Farukhi etc. from east. While not every physician shares these luminary narrative abilities, all physicians require solid verbal and written communication skills.

Finally, combining relevant literature with community volunteer work, mentored service-learning projects, or activist-oriented research can broaden student's educational experiences.

Interdisciplinary learning involving various health professional students should promote lasting cooperation and collaboration. Medicine stands in an atypical relation to society. Often understood as its own culture, it is seemingly apart from but also closely intermingled in our lives. This come together encourages us to consider the interconnections, and the differences, of approaches to the field of medicine.

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