



MINI-SYMPOSIUM

The arts and humanities in health and medicine

Kenneth C. Calman*

Durham University, Old Shire Hall, Durham, DH1 3HP, UK

Accepted 3 August 2005

There is an increasing interest in the arts and humanities in relation to health and medicine. While this is not a new issue, the interest derives from a feeling that scientific eyes may not be the only way to look at health and illness. So why might we be interested?

First, the use of the arts and humanities allows us to consider people as whole individuals, whole communities, and in particular, issues around quality of life. The range is considerable. It includes literature, philosophy, music, the visual arts, theatre, arts in the community, and many other subjects.

The philosophical interest has of course been very long standing and includes ethical issues, and the dilemmas faced by doctors. However, it is broader than this and an interest in philosophy or the humanities allows us to analyse problems, to consider arguments, and to be clear about how we feel, how we know, and how we might act¹. The humanities allow us to understand how others might feel and help us to see problems from their perspective. From an historical background, indeed until the last 50 years or so, it would be expected that most people coming into medicine might have an arts degree with some background in philosophy, logic and rhetoric. As this is no longer so there has been an increasing discussion on how the arts and humanities might assist in improving patient care.

The major themes in relation to the arts and health are concerned with their possible value in professional education, in therapy, and in community

wellbeing. The evidence is slowly building up that the arts do change these aspects of the doctor's work, but more needs to be accumulated. Over the last few years there has been a spate of conferences, papers, seminars and debates on such subjects and centres for the study of arts and humanities in health and medicine are developing across the world.²⁻⁵

For example, there is increasing interest in the use of literature and medical education. This can range from short stories and poetry to novels, whether or not they have a direct link to clinical practice. Indeed, studies with students have shown that they prefer the 'serious' literature rather than that only related to doctors and clinical practice⁶. For example, books such as *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh, or Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, both illustrate a range of health problems, including domestic violence, which are dealt with from the point of view of the writer, rather than the physician. This gives added power and such books have therefore the potential to make the student or the doctor think differently about how they work, and how they act. The portrayal of illness is another aspect of such novels particularly chronic disease, and in some instances psychiatric illness. They all add a different dimension to medical education.

For this reason the collection of a library by individual doctors has always been part of medical education. While much of this relates to medical books, most of the great libraries of physicians in the past have covered a very wide range of subjects and indicated a degree of learning and erudition well beyond medicine. The use of books is critical as the following two quotations suggest:

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 191 374 6214.
E-mail address: kenneth.calman@durham.ac.uk.

"To study the phenomena of disease without books is to sail an uncharted sea. While to study books without patients is never to go to sea at all." Sir William Osler.

"Medicine is my lawful wife but literature is my mistress. When I am bored with one I spend a night with the other." Anton Chekhov.

The arts are increasingly seen as part of professional, and in particular medical, education. Courses, seminars and discussions occur with increasing frequency, and the bright, intelligent, fact-filled medical students find such events a wonderful release, to think of life, quality of life, and clinical issues in a different way. They stimulate imagination, curiosity and creativity, all things which are central to the role and aim of the doctor, and of medicine.

Increasingly, as hospitals are being built and developed, or redeveloped, the place of art has become increasingly important. A wide range of new buildings incorporate sculpture, paintings and the visual arts, and events such as poetry readings, music and theatre take place within the hospital setting. They add a different dimension to those in hospital who may be suffering from a variety of illnesses and who can see music and art as a further dimension to their lives. These projects are now being evaluated across the world, and there is the beginning of an evidence base which suggests that they make the environment more comfortable, more human, and thus enriched.

There is also an increasing role for the use of arts in therapy. This may range from painting and music, to movement and dance. Each of these can contribute to quality of life of the individual patient and provide a release from pain and sickness, and allow, in spite of physical illness, a creative spirit to take over. The importance of being able to continue to think and create is an extraordinarily powerful one in the midst of illness.

In a similar way, there is an increasing use of art in the community. Public sculpture, displays, theatre, music, all add to the concept of a community, and they help to create that community, and build the community into something richer and more cohesive. Such projects can range from large public sculptures through to lantern displays and the production of art and craft related activities.

Importantly, humour plays a substantial part in improving the quality of life⁷. This may be through

films, videos, books or cartoons, all of which have known affects on blood pressure, hormone release, immunity, and a general feeling of wellbeing. Perhaps we should use humour more frequently in clinical practice.

The arts are also particularly important for a number of specific groups including the disabled and those with mental health problems. The role of dance, theatre and drama, painting, either by the patient, or by those caring for them, illustrates and illuminates the problems, and helps others to understand and deal with them.

Emphasis has been placed on the importance of quality of life. The following quotation from Oliver Wendell Holmes in *The Professor at the Breakfast Table* says this very clearly:

"The longer I live the more I am satisfied of two things. First, that the truest lives are those that are cut rose-diamond fashion, with many facets. Second, that society in one way or another is always trying to grind us down to a single flat surface."

This quotation from a distinguished American physician illustrates an important point. That is that patients are not flat surfaces associated with single physical diseases. They are whole people with feelings, thoughts and anxieties. The arts may give us an additional way of helping to improve the quality of life of those we look after.

References

1. Evans M, Louhiala P, Puustinen R. *Philosophy for Medicine: Applications in a Clinical Context*. Oxford: Radcliffe Medical Press Limited; 2004.
2. Lancaster T, Hart R, Gardner S. Literature and Medicine: evaluating a special study module using the nominal group technique. *Medical Education* 2002;**36**:1071-6.
3. Macnaughton J, White M, Stacey R. Research in the benefits of art and health, *Health Education*; in press.
4. Shapiro J, Duke A, Boker J, Ahearn CS. Just a spoonful of humanities makes the medicine go down: introducing literature into a family medicine clerkship. *Medical Education* 2005;**39**:605-12.
5. Watkins P. The healing environment. *Clinical Medicine* 2005; **5**:197-8.
6. Calman KC, Downie RS, Duthie M, Sweeney B. Literature and Medicine: a short course for medical students. *Medical Education* 1988;**22**:265-9.
7. Calman KC. *A Study of Storytelling, Humour and Learning in Medicine*. London: The Stationery Office; 2000.