

Medicine and literature: a section in a medical university library

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Abstract

Objectives: In 2007, the Alberto Malliani Medical Library of the Università degli Studi in Milan decided to order some novels for its students. The library purchased 24 titles written by famous authors and planned to add others in the future. The proposal for this action was made by a professor, with whom the library had previously co-operated in organising meetings for students. This article summarises the results of this experiment over 4 years, from its conception, to determine whether any positive outcome has resulted, including how library users welcomed this addition to the library and evaluation of its economic sustainability.

Results: Data from July 2007 to December 2010 are presented in terms of the initial purchases, costs, and volume of lending for this section of the library; in addition, readers' preferences are examined.

Conclusions: A university medical library can act as a stimulus to its students' new or renewed interest in literature, assuming that the novels, biographies, and short stories can contribute positively to the training of medical students. Therefore, setting up a special section can be useful, even though the costs of this section must be limited. A questionnaire could be the method of gathering information about users' assessment.

Keywords: academic, further education, General Practitioners (GPs), health science, libraries, students.

Implications for Practice

- An initiative for creating a literature section in a university medical library must be set up in accord with the teaching body of the university and after an internal discussion within the decision-making section of the library.
- Costs must be carefully limited.

Implications for Policy

- The library agrees to promote the training of medical students in ways that reach beyond the traditional curriculum.
- A literature section can encourage user participation in the activities of the library.
- A literature section offers the library the chance to attract new users.

Background

In April 2007, the Alberto Malliani Medical Library, the reference library for the teaching center of Vialba at the Luigi Sacco Hospital, Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, Università degli Studi in

Milan, with a student population of approximately 550, received a request for the acquisition of 24 books from a professor of medical statistics and biometry. This request was notable because the books were not medical textbooks; rather, they were novels, short stories and biographies.

The purpose of this professor's request was to stimulate students' ability to expand the traditional education offered by the university. The subject was not new to this professor, who had already, in

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co-operation with the library, organised a course about the relationship between cinema and medicine as well as three series of meetings entitled 'Being a Doctor'.

The Library Council discussed this request and emphasis was put upon one of the characteristics of the Sacco Hospital teaching center: the majority of students are from areas surrounding Milan and usually spend most of the day at the university. This tends to mean that they have less opportunity for borrowing books from their local library; however, they could have free time between classes that could be filled with good reading material. These texts could offer students some cues to reflect upon medicine: 'Novels that portray the history of medicine, whether sketchily or in depth, give readers a snapshot of the development of medicine and its practitioners. The works of physician-writers [...] document, often powerfully and eloquently, how some professionals have nourished an important part of their lives outside medicine.'¹ The literature section therefore could serve the library by attracting new library users.

The decision rested with the Library Council, as Article 16, section 10 of the General Regulations of the Università degli Studi in Milan (<http://www.unimi.it/ateneo/normativa/4876.htm>) reads that it is up to the Library Council:

- To approve of the budget and the closing balance sheet of the library;
- To annually plan the basic general expenses of the library;
- To ask for further human and financial resources;
- To suggest recommendations to improve the effectiveness of library services;
- To approve of the expenses, superior to the limits established by the Administrative and Financial Regulations of the Università degli studi in Milan.

The Library Council ultimately approved the proposal with a commitment to monitor the impact of the initiative on students.

Materials and methods

The professor, who proposed the initiative, chose the initial group of books, listed in Table 1, based on their 'instrumental value' in the training of

medical students and because of their intrinsic literary worth. In addition to the authors' renown, the selected novels, short stories, and biographies had a common denominator: a theme of illness, private or collective, physical or mental; in this they were linked to healing or suffering. In particular, a representation of the relationship established between the doctor and his or her patient in which the painful involvement of the latter in the illness can often be compared with the aseptic approach of the professional, who does not engage the individual (and unique) case of the patient (de Beauvoir,² Tolstoy³). The relationship between the illness (or the patient) and society itself also finds its place (Camus,⁴ Pirandello⁵). In some cases, these themes can be found throughout the novel; in others they are only ideas, a few pages, or secondary characters that manage to outline the problem precisely.

The opening of a new section in the library, comprising novels, short stories, and biographies, always in the Italian edition, was regarded by the students as a novelty. The display racks purchased for the occasion and placed in the entry hall contributed to the initiative's publicity, which immediately attracted attention and, gradually, readers. The students were asked to participate by making suggestions for new titles to be added to the small original group, via an online acquisition form on the library homepage. Many of them proposed recent works, some of which were of an entertainment genre (e.g., detective novels and thrillers). The only mandatory condition for the proposals was that they should have a link with medicine: this could be through a theme of the book, the characters, or the authors, many of whom are both physicians and writers. Students were not the only ones who took part in the expansion of the section: teachers, professors and librarians also contributed by suggesting their own personal favourites or new releases reviewed in newspapers or on the Internet that were unlikely to have been thought of in relation to medicine.

Many useful suggestions for the selection of purchases were obtained from three Italian anthologies.⁶⁻⁸ De Cataldo and Pomes, the editors of one of these anthologies, point out that detective stories can be seen as surprising examples of how literature and medicine are interwoven: the

Table 1 Initial title list

Authors	Italian titles	English titles
Allende, Isabel	<i>Paula</i>	<i>Paula</i>
Beauvoir, Simone de	<i>Una morte dolcissima</i>	<i>A Very Easy Death</i>
Bernanos, Georges	<i>Dialoghi delle carmelitane</i>	<i>Dialogues of the Carmelites</i>
Berto, Giuseppe	<i>Il male oscuro</i>	<i>The Dark Illness</i>
Camus, Albert	<i>La peste</i>	<i>The Plague</i>
Camus, Albert	<i>La morte felice</i>	<i>A Happy Death</i>
Céline, Louis Ferdinand	<i>Il dottor Semmelweis</i>	<i>The Life and Work of Semmelweis</i>
Céline, Louis Ferdinand	<i>Viaggio al termine della notte</i>	<i>Journey to the End of Night</i>
Cronin, Archibald	<i>La cittadella</i>	<i>The Citadel</i>
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor	<i>L'idiota</i>	<i>The Idiot</i>
Foscolo, Ugo	<i>Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis</i>	<i>The Last letters of Jacopo Ortis</i>
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von	<i>I dolori del giovane Werther</i>	<i>The Sorrows of Young Werther</i>
Hesse, Hermann	<i>La cura</i>	<i>The Guest at the Spa</i>
Kafka, Franz	<i>La metamorfosi</i>	<i>The Metamorphosis</i>
Lessing, Doris (as Somers, Jane)	<i>Il diario di Jane Somers</i>	<i>The Diary of a Good Neighbour</i>
Mann, Thomas	<i>La montagna incantata</i>	<i>The Magic Mountain</i>
Pasternak, Boris	<i>Il dottor Zivago</i>	<i>Doctor Zhivago</i>
Pirandello, Luigi	<i>Vestire gli ignudi; L'altro figlio; L'uomo dal fiore in bocca</i>	<i>Clothing the Naked; The Other Son; The Man with the Flower in his Mouth</i>
Remarque, Erich Maria	<i>Niente di nuovo sul fronte occidentale</i>	<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>
Svevo, Italo	<i>La coscienza di Zeno e Continuazioni</i>	<i>Zeno's Conscience</i>
Tolstoy, Leo	<i>La confessione</i>	<i>Confession</i>
Tolstoy, Leo	<i>La morte di Ivan Ilic</i>	<i>The Death of Ivan Ilyich</i>
Wolf, Virginia	<i>Saggi, prose, racconti</i>	<i>Essays, Prose Works, Stories</i>
Yourcenar, Marguerite	<i>Memorie di Adriano</i>	<i>Memoirs of Hadrian</i>

detective has traits in common with the physician, with whom he shares the method that 'consists of a wise blend of deduction and intuition [...] to get to the origin of the disorder (diagnosis or motif) and the remedy (therapy or neutralization of the criminal).'⁹

An instrument that has been useful for non-Italian works is the 'Literature, Arts and Medicine Database,' (<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Main?action=new>) an electronic archive started in the early 1990s from a project at the New York University School of Medicine, which aims to provide 'a dynamic, accessible, comprehensive source for teaching and research in medical humanities.' (<http://litmed.med.nyu.edu/Main?action=aboutDB>). It contains information on numerous literary texts, as well as films, videos, paintings, and articles, that refer to the relationship between medicine and literature. Each work has an index card that contains keywords, comments, a summary, and, for some works, the full text in English.¹⁰ This open-access archive has been used to verify the

suggestions and proposals users make and to choose new titles.

Results

Data from July 2007 to December 2010 are available, including the number of volumes catalogued in the literature section, the number of loans, the cost of providing this service, and the titles that have been most successful with readers.

A total of 153 volumes were catalogued, for which 555 loans were recorded (Table 2).

A factor to be considered is the cost involved in creating the medicine and literature section of the library. Table 3 shows these costs (in 2007 and 2009 the cost of the display racks is also indicated), for a total amount of €3441.72 (US \$4598.83). As a 'niche' section of the library, costs had to be contained. Therefore, many of the selected works were purchased as economic editions at low cost; 23.53% of the total number of books was donated (36 donations from a total of 153 books in December

Table 2 Titles and loans

	2007*	2008	2009	2010	2007–2010
Titles	37	31	44	41	153
Loans	29	119	197	210	555

*07/01/2007–12/31/2007.

2010). The cost of the display racks is seen as an investment for coming years.

Which titles have been the most sought after? All the novels in the medicine and literature section are traceable through the online catalogue of Milan's Università degli Studi, (<http://opac.unimi.it/SebinaOpac/Opac?sysb=>) whose library system includes the Malliani library. The readers' choice has been awarded to the first 22 positions, shown in Table 4. Four titles included in the initial group (see Table 1) appear in the list and these books may be considered 'valid cases' of the interweaving of literature and medicine; these four are works by Allende,¹¹ Dostoyevsky,¹² Céline¹³ and Tolstoy.³ Other recent publications are at the top of the list, two of which were written by professors on the faculty (Cattaneo¹⁴ and Malliani¹⁵). Two authors, both physicians, appear with more than one title: neurologist Sacks^{16,17} and anesthesiologist Venturino.^{18,19}

No marked preference on the part of readers was shown for Italian works. Forty-one (26.80%) of the total of 153 titles that make up the section were authored by Italian writers; loans of Italian-authored works numbered 156 of a total of 555 (28.11%).

Discussion

Many novels and short stories have illness as their literary theme 'par excellence,' just as there are numerous doctors who are also authors.

Table 3 Costs (€1 = US \$1.3362 – 12/31/2010)

	2007*	2008	2009	2010	2007–2010
Volumes	€268.64	€381.55	€445.49	€284.44	€1380.12
	US \$358.96	US \$509.83	US \$595.26	US \$380.07	US \$1844.12
Display racks	€1068	0	€993.60	0	€2061.60
	US \$1427.06		US \$1327.65		US \$2754.71

*07/01/2007–12/31/2007.

Authoritative confirmation comes from PUBMED, where research on Chekhov, Tolstoy, or James shows many relevant results, keeping within the limit of the *Personal Name as Subject* Field or operating on the title or browsing the database through *Related Articles*. However, this is not enough to prove the usefulness of a literature section in a medical library and a question that must be answered remains: What has a novel to do with a medical student?

It is possible to start from this thought: literature is the 'place' where writers describe patients and their sensibility and narrate a great number of clinical cases, putting them into a human dimension. This ability can lead the doctor to see things that daily routine would otherwise make him or her miss and can also contribute to the achievement of *educated* students, not simply *trained* ones.²⁰

Charon *et al.* remind us that in the United States literature was introduced in medical studies in 1972, with the aim of developing in future doctors the ability to 'read' illness from the patient's point of view. This ability manifests itself when the physician interviews 'the patient to establish therapeutic alliances with patients and their families, to arrive at accurate diagnoses, and to choose and work towards appropriate clinical goals.'²¹ In particular, Charon *et al.* cite the case of physician-writers who succeed in representing, in both professional and psychological detail, ordinary stories of medicine, narrating them *from inside* and thus '[...] lead physician-readers to examine critically their own intimate and complicated relationships with their work and with their patients.'²²

Verghese questions whether doctors can learn something from writers. Their affinities are many: for example, novelists know that '[...] it is really characters who drive stories. A clever story by itself makes for very dull reading unless a very compelling character makes the story come about.

Table 4 Reader's choice

Authors	Italian titles	English or original titles	Loans
Sacks, Oliver	<i>L'uomo che scambiò sua moglie per un cappello</i>	<i>The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat</i>	18
Cattaneo, Cristina	<i>Turno di notte</i>	(No English edition)	18
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor	<i>L'idiota*</i>	<i>The Idiot</i>	16
Bulgakov, Mikhail	<i>Appunti di un giovane medico</i>	<i>A Country Doctor's Notebook</i>	16
Venturino, Marco	<i>Cosa sognano i pesci rossi</i>	(No English edition)	15
Bauby, Jean-Dominique	<i>Lo scafandro e la farfalla</i>	<i>The Diving Bell and the Butterfly</i>	13
Haddon, Mark	<i>Lo strano caso del cane ucciso a mezzanotte</i>	<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time</i>	12
Malliani, Alberto	<i>L'ombra delle parole</i>	(No English edition)	11
Venturino, Marco	<i>Si è fatto tutto il possibile</i>	(No English edition)	11
Pennac, Daniel	<i>La lunga notte del dottor Galvan</i>	<i>Ancien Malade des Hopitaux de Paris</i> (No English edition)	11
Giordano, Paolo	<i>La solitudine dei numeri primi</i>	<i>The Solitude of Prime Numbers</i>	10
Pausch, Randy	<i>L'ultima lezione</i>	<i>Last Lecture</i>	9
Sacks, Oliver	<i>Emicrania</i>	<i>Migraine</i>	9
Saramago, José	<i>Le intermittenze della morte</i>	<i>Death with Interruptions</i>	9
Céline. Louis Ferdinand	<i>Il dottor Semmelweis*</i>	<i>The Life and Work of Semmelweis</i>	8
Tolstoy, Leo	<i>La morte di Ivan Ilic*</i>	<i>The Death of Ivan Ilyich</i>	8
Allende, Isabel	<i>Paula*</i>	<i>Paula</i>	8
Winckler, Martin	<i>La malattia di Sachs</i>	<i>The Case of Dr. Sachs</i>	8
McGrath, Patrick	<i>Follia</i>	<i>Asylum</i>	8
García Márquez, Gabriel	<i>L'amore ai tempi del colera</i>	<i>Love in the Time of Cholera</i>	8
Bartoccioni, Sandro Bonadonna, Gianni Sartori, Francesco	<i>Dall'altra parte</i>	(No English edition)	8
Coe, Jonathan	<i>La casa del sonno</i>	<i>The house of sleep</i>	8

*Titles in the initial purchase list.

[...]. Novelists create rounded characters mostly through dialogue and by the action of their characters. What a character says is terribly important, particularly when it is in tension with what the reader (or the doctor) knows about the patient. In medicine, dialogue is the primary way by which we understand the nuances of character. After all, that is how patients approach us [*the doctor*], by recounting their story of what happened,²³ which is then registered in the medical record with completely different and technical language.

Cagli points out the potential usefulness of literature as a factor that enriches and reinforces doctors' capacity to listen to a sick person's story, to 'give room to his or her subjective experience. We all accept objectivity as a canon of science. A doctor, to substantiate his or her diagnosis, to choose the direction of treatment and to establish prognosis, based on a less uncertain knowledge base, will seek objective data. These objective data will

come from a physical examination, from clinical interpretation of laboratory tests. However [...] there is a whole world of subjectivity of the patient, of the way in which he or she experiences the illness and suffering, which stays closed to us if we don't have the will and the capacity to understand them in our range of action.²⁴

Conclusions

The remarks presented here endorse an opportunity to introduce the analysis of novels, biographies, and short stories in the education of future physicians. Therefore, setting up a special section in a university medical library can be useful, even though the costs of this section must be limited. In any case the initiative must be set up only in accord with the teaching body of the university.

At the Malliani library, data show that this section of the library is used, even with its small

numbers. For the near future, the purpose is to give it voice by means of a questionnaire on the quality of the service and then gather users' assessments regarding the presence of narrative texts in a medical library.

It is important to verify the readers' interest in 'great authors' as well as whether they are interested predominantly in Italian authors and in the Italian edition for foreign literary works. Such data will indicate the level of readers' satisfaction and what future developments should be pursued.

Another survey will be focused on whether there are collections similar to the medicine and literature section in other Italian medical university libraries.

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