

2019
Narrative
Medicine
Workshop




Vase with Flowers

difficult for a truly
creative painter than to
paint a rose, because
before he can do so, he
has first to forget all the
roses that were ever
painted."

- Henri Matisse





Narrative Medicine Workshop

- **When:** Friday, October 11 to Sunday, October 13
- **Where:** Irving Medical Center at Columbia University in New York City
- **Who:** More than 100 healthcare providers, scientists, academics, writers and artists from around the world
- **What:** Explored how the humanities could be better integrated into clinical practice

Lectures include:

- “Reconceptualizing Empathy” by Maura Spiegel, PhD
- “Writing in the Clinical Context and Beyond” by Nellie Hermann, MFA
- “Bearing Witness to Yourself in the Work” by Deepthiman Gowda, MD, MPH



What is Narrative Medicine?

- Narrative medicine was developed in the 1990s. The field's most prominent proponent is Rita Charon, MD, an internist at the Columbia University Irving Medical Center in New York.
- Dr. Charon's big idea is that by studying literature and other arts doctors can develop deeper psychological insights and sensitivities, allowing them to listen to their patients better.
- Narrative medicine also encourages physicians to write and share their stories of clinical encounters with one another.
- Dr. Charon believes that clinicians can benefit their patients by opening up about their struggles, but they can also benefit by learning to listen to themselves better.
- Since the 90's, narrative medicine has developed into a master's program at Columbia University and evolved into an international movement.



A New Approach to Patient Visits

- Instead of using questionnaires and checklists, Dr. Charon learned to say to each new patient...
- “I will be your doctor, so I need to know a great deal about your body and your health and your life. Please tell me what you think I should know about your situation.”
- And her patients would tell her what she needed to know.



Small Group Workshops

- At the conference, we attended several two-hour sessions where we discussed a poem or short story, did some writing of our own based on prompts from the instructor, and then discussed what we had written.
- In my group, we had a scholar in medical humanities from France, two mid-wives, a nurse, a basic researcher, and an actress.
- Our workshop was led by a public defender who had suffered with multiple illnesses, including lupus and a tumor on her pituitary gland.
- Writing prompts ranged from the open-ended to the specific and provocative:
 - Write about a time you asked for someone's trust
 - Write about a time you taught someone something
 - Write about a time you helped a stranger
 - Write about pain
 - Write about a time when you had two answers to the same question
 - What's the most creative thing you've done today
- Purpose: Writing reflectively allowed us to externalize and process how we feel. By putting words to feelings, we make our experiences concrete. By reading aloud, we can discuss our experiences with others and get different perspectives.

Putting the Humanities in Medicine

- The field of Narrative Medicine has been growing rapidly, proving that there's a hunger among clinicians to talk about their experiences and what it means to care for the suffering.
- Countless healthcare providers say that they weren't prepared for onslaught of complex events to which they are exposed and that they have few, if any, outlets to unpack, process, metabolize, and integrate morally and psychological challenging experiences.
- Narrative medicine is being studied as a potential antidote to exhaustion, burnout, and even despair that has reached epidemic proportions among healthcare providers.

Burnout Among Healthcare Providers

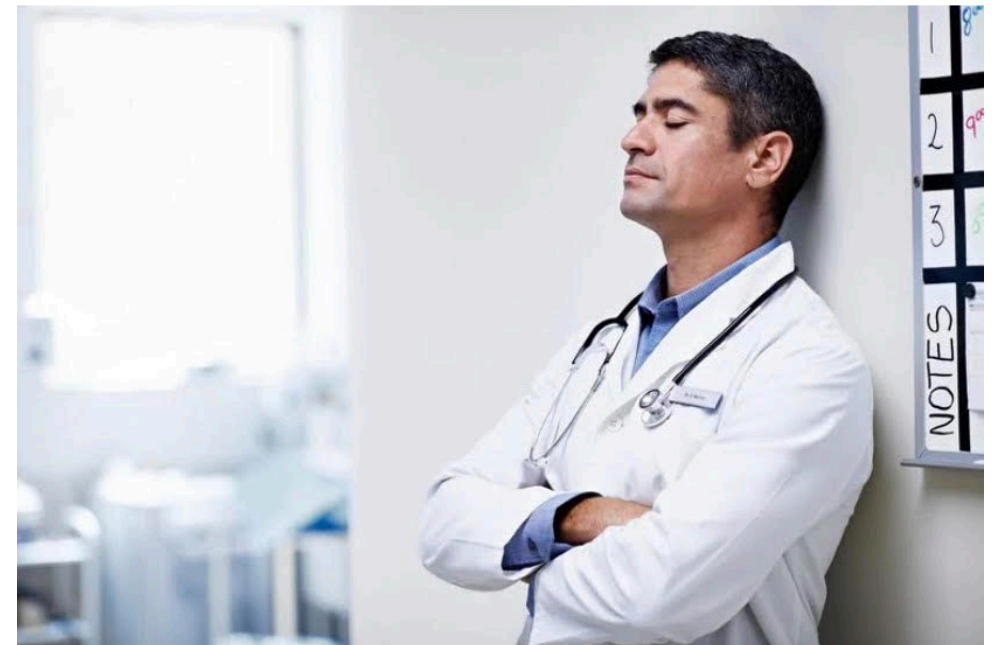
- Stress and burnout among doctors, nurses and other hospital staff has become a public health crisis.
- A recent study of nurses at a Colorado University Hospital found that **86 percent** met the criteria of having burnout syndrome, and **22 percent** had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Doctors commit suicide at a rate **double** that of the wider population.



Health

Health-care system causing rampant burnout among doctors, nurses

As many as half of all clinicians suffer from the problem, creating risks to patients, malpractice claims and absenteeism, study finds.



Is Art the Answer to Burnout?

- A 2019 study in the *Annals of Palliative Medicine* found that burnout decreased among palliative care providers when they read for pleasure.
- A 2018 study in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* concluded that medical students who engaged in the arts had higher levels of empathy and emotional intelligence, and lower levels of burnout.
- A 2010 review found that music can reduce anxiety, the visual arts can put difficult-to-process experiences into words, dance can relieve stress, and expressive writing can lead to healing.



For decades, art therapy has been used to help patients. But today, doctors are looking at how it can also help health care providers. Illustration by Getty Images

Burnout is rampant among doctors and nurses. Can the arts help?

By [Elizabeth Flock](#)

Arts Nov 5, 2019 3:54 PM EST

Some 20 years ago, pulmonologist Marc Moss was working in the intensive care unit when a patient went into cardiac arrest. Moss and others tried to revive the man, but he did not survive. As doctors often are, Moss was pressed for time and he asked several medical students to stay with the deceased patient and fill out the necessary paperwork so that Moss could return to another patient he'd been seeing. Not long after, he noticed one of the students crying.

How Does Narrative Medicine Help Burnout?

- **Attention:** Paying attention is a clinical skill. By paying close attention to a poem or art, you build the capacity to pay attention to oneself and the needs of others.
- **Representation:** Writing is a form of meaning-making.
- **Affiliation:** Workshops builds trust with peers.
- **Creativity:** Healthcare providers need creativity. They need to be creative to recognize what is needed in the moment to give the best care.



Psychological Relief and Connection Through Poetry

- More hospitals are turning to the power of the written word, and poetry in particular, to help patients process their conditions and heal.
- As part of a pilot study, Dr. Joshua Hauser, chief of palliative care at the Jesse Brown VA Medical Center, is reading poems like “Invictus” to patients at their bedside.
- The study also aims to see if reading poetry with patients can help alleviate doctor burnout. “This is a way of moving the clinician closer to their patients, being part of their experience and their world,” Dr. Hauser says.



YOUR HEALTH

A Prescription of Poetry to Help Patients Speak Their Minds

Doctors at several major hospitals are experimenting with poems as a source of psychological relief and connection



By [Sumathi Reddy](#)

Dec. 1, 2019 5:30 am ET



SHARE



TEXT

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Chicago

Dr. Joshua Hauser approached the bedside of his patient, treatment in hand. But it wasn't medicine he carried. It was a copy of a 19th-century poem titled “Invictus.”

“Finding Permission to Reflect”

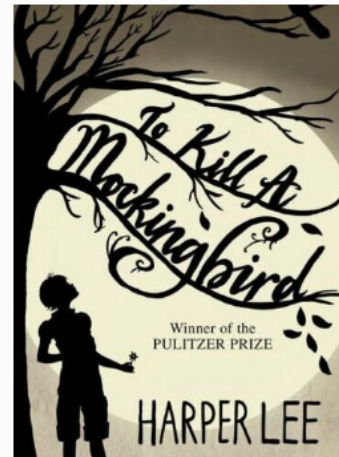
- In this article, Suzanne Koven, MD, the Writer-in-Residence at MGH, talks about how she began facilitating monthly literature and medicine discussion groups at MGH.
- During small group workshops, they read books like *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* and fictional stories like Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.
- “Talking about these texts, the nurses, doctors, and other hospital staff in the group found permission to reflect on the deepest, most troubling, and most exhilarating aspects of our work.”

How Medicine Made Me a Reader

SUZANNE KOVEN



I could begin by telling you that I was a lonely child who found solace in books—but I’d be lying. I was lonely, but I did not salve my loneliness by reading. I found inventing dramas for Barbie and Midge and snooping in my mother’s night table drawer—what *was* that unlabeled tube of goo?—much more interesting than Pippi Longstocking or Ramona. I was a competent enough reader according to the color-coded tests administered in the 1960s by the New York City public school system, and progressed from turquoise to silver along with the brighter kids in my class, but for the most part I remained unmoved by books. There were exceptions, particularly as I entered adolescence when I read, again and again, three predictable favorites: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *The Catcher in the Rye*. Like so many kids, I saw myself in Francie Nolan, Scout Finch, and Holden Caulfield—but, to my shame, I still did not see myself as a reader.



In high school and college, as an English major, I became not so much a reader as a student of literature. I saw poetry and fiction as puzzles to be solved, tests to be aced. My paper-writing technique was to find a theme, flip through the text to gather quotes related to that theme, and stick them together. “*Eyes in The Great Gatsby*,” by Suzanne Koven. I briefly considered a career in journalism but soon after graduation signed up to take chemistry and calculus and, being at the age when you believe you have to be one type of person or another, I decided I was the type of person who becomes a doctor, i.e. not the type of person who reads.

Then a funny thing happened. Freed of thinking of myself as a reader, I started to read. Between integrals and stoichiometry (I’m showing off: I have no idea what either of those are now and didn’t



Healing Without a Cure

- At Beth Israel, Rafael Campo, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and poetry section editor of the medical journal JAMA, holds writing workshops and poetry seminars with patients and staff.
- “We don’t always have a cure in medicine, but poetry can actually heal in a broader sense, and so I think many patients feel healed even in the absence of a medical cure for their illness,” says Dr. Campo.

What the Body Told

BY RAFAEL CAMPO

Not long ago, I studied medicine.
 It was terrible, what the body told.
 I’d look inside another person’s mouth,
 And see the desolation of the world.
 I’d see his genitals and think of sin.

Because my body speaks the stranger’s language,
 I’ve never understood those nods and stares.
 My parents held me in their arms, and still
 I think I’ve disappointed them; they care
 And stare, they nod, they make their pilgrimage

To somewhere distant in my heart, they cry.
 I look inside their other-person’s mouths
 And see the wet interior of souls.
 It’s warm and red in there—like love, with teeth.
 I’ve studied medicine until I cried

All night. Through certain books, a truth unfolds.
 Anatomy and physiology,
 The tiny sensing organs of the tongue—
 Each nameless cell contributing its needs.
 It was fabulous, what the body told.

Intersection of Literature, Biology, Philosophy

- Neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi chronicles in his piercing memoir of being diagnosed with terminal cancer at the peak of a career.
- Kalanithi weaves together philosophical reflections on his personal journey with stories of his patients to illuminate the only thing we have in common — our mortality — and how it spurs all of us, in ways both minute and monumental, to pursue a life of meaning.
- “I was driven less by achievement than by trying to understand, in earnest: What makes human life meaningful? I still felt literature provided the best account of the life of the mind, while neuroscience laid down the most elegant rules of the brain. Meaning, while a slippery concept, seemed inextricable from human relationships and moral values... Literature not only illuminated another’s experience, it provided, I believed, the richest material for moral reflection.”

