

Why Humanities in Medicine ?

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“ There has to be a balance between the science and humanities in medicine “ (Robert Davies)

Medical education used to train medical students to think and understand human problems from a humanistic approach when it first became a part of the university program during the middle ages. Descartes’s dualism separating body from mind, however, motivated medical thinking to develop a new model centered only on biomedical science. Abraham Flexner’s report in 1910 which attempted to reform medical education still saw science as a basis for medicine in medical education. His report has determined the direction of medical training in modern time. The imbalance in the two integral components of medicine, humanities and bioscience, however, remained unchanged. No wonder David Truman described our physicians as “ trained but uneducated, technically skilled but culturally incompetent “ [1] in reference to the fact that our physicians treat diseases not persons.

The tremendous development of medical technology in the last few decades has challenged the medical profession to re-think its approach and restore the balance between science and humanities within medicine. Besides, rapid progress in the pharmaceutical field, in mechanical devices and medical skills has also raised new questions upon us, such as: where and when does human life begin ? what is the moment of death ? what are the limits in the research and manipulation of man ? what is the meaning and the destiny of man ? what kind of biochemical, pharmacological, surgical, psychological and genetic treatments affect the identity of the human person ? ...etc. A medical education heavily centered in bioscience would be ill-prepared to answer these questions.

In the past, the doctor enjoyed freedom in his self-chosen relationship with his patients to whom he offered his services and who, in return, honored him. Today most countries’ medical systems are socialized. The right to proper medical care is recognized as one of the most fundamental human right. Such a

situation inevitably leads to a socialization of the medical profession. The doctor has become one of the various social servants working for the government's health insurance bureau. Such a change brings us new concerns, such as unnecessary physical tests, prescriptions and operations, the deteriorating patient-physician relationship, the unfair distributions of limited resources.... etc.

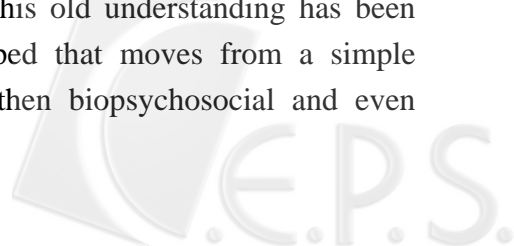
Because of the broad scope of medicine, medical scientists must seek a holistic vision of man. The modern physician can no longer approach biological and medical decisions without being ready to raise fundamental human questions and the search for answers to them. He must take a courageous step towards an understanding of freedom by expressing in terms of social responsibility for the whole of humanity. These new realities and changes compel medical educators to reconsider the content of medical education. Is our goal simply to train a physician skilled in treating diseases yet being unaware of the human predicaments tangled in a complicated social fabric that make a person what he is ?

The call to incorporate humanities into medical education was voiced by Dr. Edmund Pellegrino in the 1960s.[2] By 1973 there were 40 humanities "programs" in American medical schools. [3] Cassell reported in 1984 that the movement to add humanities in medical training was gaining momentum.[4] In the following year medical ethics became a required course for all medical students in North American Medical schools.

The nature of medical service, medical progress and its responsibility in a new age have obliged medical professionals to re-think the purpose of medicine and to ponder how it can act responsibly. To achieve this goal, medicine must act in absolute solidarity with other disciplines by initiating a sincere dialogue with behavioral sciences, philosophy, literature, theology.... Without this new attempt, medicine may lock itself in an ivory tower seeing man only from a narrow diagnostic-prognostic angle.

Under these circumstances medical humanities have been recommended.

The main concern of medicine used to be the human physical condition. It was believed that a person's illness was due to physical problems as Descartes, Bichet, Virchow and Pasteur thought. But this old understanding has been challenged and a new understanding developed that moves from a simple biomedical paradigm to psychosomatic and then biopsychosocial and even spiritual emphases.



Bernard Haring, a well-respected theologian and ethicist suggested that medicine has to pay attention from the present to the future, from an individual personalism of the patient-doctor relationship to a social-collective accountability of medicine and to the whole human society. [5] T.J. Murray, a professor of medical humanities in Canada said that the call to pay attention to the medical humanities in medical education is not a call to de-emphasize science, rather, it is to achieve a balance between bioscience and humanities so that physicians can be equipped with knowledge and wisdom to understand human illness and predicaments from a more human perspective. [6]

These calls remind us that the role of medicine in 21st century must be expanded from merely a biomedically-oriented science to a holistic biopsychosocial and even spiritual emphasis. The physicians of tomorrow must know not only how to treat physical diseases with empathy but also to take their responsibility seriously as healers of the whole person. Medical humanities is one of the tools to achieve this goal.

Medical humanities, literally speaking, refer to those humanity courses having to do with medicine based on a biopsychosocial understanding such as medical sociology, biomedical ethics, medical psychology, history of medicine, communication between physicians and patients.....etc. In reality, medical humanities, when properly planned and offered, should enable medical students to develop a new understanding of life and a concern for social justice. It should be a design to help students develop a new value theory so that they will become people-oriented physicians. But in order for students to understand basic human nature, more courses must be considered, such as social customs, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions which all affect our attitudes toward health, life, and even death. Thus, a philosophy of life, religion and medicine, thanatology, cultural anthropology, even literatures... must also be introduced. Medical humanities cover a wide spectrum of social sciences and humanities. It is not to take away the importance of bioscience, on the contrary, it is to enhance it so that medical professionals can understand the nature of human life from a wider perspective. The purposes of introducing these courses are no other than:

1. to cultivate a holistic understanding of personhood
2. to enable medical students to know the human side of medicine and the effect of the environment and life-style on health

3. to provide students opportunities for continuing reflection on themselves as they grow in medical knowledge
4. to foster a sense of “ Medicine as Vocation”
5. to study ethical theories and their applications to clinical decision-making
6. to promote a consciousness of physicians’ social responsibility

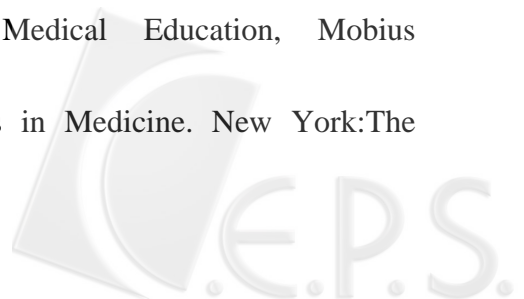
Medical education should pass on a humanized medicine so that medical students may understand, experience and grasp a humanistic philosophy of medicine and thus establish their own value theory, ethical standard and eventually their own life philosophy.[7] Medical humanities, as Pellegrino pointed out, are distinguished by their focus on human values which is essential for medicine to avoid being swallowed up by its own technology or dehumanized by its complex organization. [8]

In summary, medical humanities attempt to equip students with a better understanding of human beings to produce physicians of tomorrow who are not only effective healers of diseases, but also restorers of human wholeness (a person of a harmonious combination of body, mind and spirit) and promoters of social justice.

As the Taiwanese saying indicates: “a superior physician heals the ills of a nation. An ordinary physician heals the brokenness of a person. An inferior physician heals only diseases.”

References

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