Narrative Medicine: Its Role in Medical Training

Carol EH Scott-Conner MD PhD
Professor Emeritus of Surgery
University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine
What is Narrative Medicine?

• Narrative = story
  – The patient’s story of illness
  – The caregiver’s story
  – The clinician’s story
• “Clinical experience”
• “Let me tell you a story...”
Programs in Narrative Medicine

• Columbia University
• Montefiore Medical Canter
• The Ohio State University Humanities Institute
• Western University
• Lenoir Rhyne University Thomas Wolfe Center for Narrative
Narrative Medicine and Scientific Medicine

- Complementary
- Not competitive schools of thought
Stories...

- ...grab our attention
- ...are mentally rich
- ...provide new perspectives
- ...are more likely to be told and retold
- ...trigger empathy and healing
- ...inspire and incite change

ISMP Medication Safety Alert, August 24, 2017
Story-telling in Medical Education

• How do we use stories to teach?
• How can we use reflective writing to build upon patient stories (and our own)?
Reflective Writing

• What is it?
• Why do it?
• What do we know?
“Empathetic witnessing”

• Teaching empathy through reflection
• Components of empathy – cognitive, emotional, action
• How do you teach empathy?
• How can reflective writing help?

Practice of Reflective Writing

• Group
  – Minimum 30 minutes
  – Writing prompt (phrase, photograph, object)
  – Everyone writes
  – Safe space for self-expression
  – Those who wish to, share their writing

• Individual
“When Medical Training Stresses you: Write it Out”

• “The Inklings” – a small group of residents
• Periodic meetings
• Safe space to write and share their writing

Michael McNeil MD, September 4, 2017, cited on KevinMD.com
Does it Work? Maybe

- Several studies showing that it is well-received
- No data to suggest it is harmful
- One study showing reduced measures of burnout but was not well controlled (Winkel et al Narrative Medicine Workshops for OB-GYN Residents and Association with Burnout Measures. Obstet Gynecol 2016)
Medical Humanities Journals

• The Examined Life
• Pulse – Voices from the Heart of Medicine
• Intima
• Hospital Drive
• The Healing Muse
• Ars Medica
Some (of many) Medical Journals the Publish Reflective Writing

• JAMA – A Piece of My Mind, Poetry in Medicine
• CHEST
• Anesthesiology
• Neurology
• Journal of General Internal Medicine
• Annals of Internal Medicine
• Canadian Medical Association Journal