Premeds and poetry

An English instructor and physician expose undergraduate students to the relationship between art and medicine.

BY KIM KISER

Once a week, during the fall of her junior year at the College of St. Benedict in Collegeville, Minnesota, Hannah Christensen would make the 30-minute drive to St. Cloud to meet with a young woman who was undergoing nocturnal hemodialysis. As the patient settled in for her eight-hour treatment, she and Christensen would read a poem together and then, using a couple of lines or an image as a prompt, write their own verses and share them with each other.

During those visits, they learned about each other’s lives, experiences and feelings. “I got to see her as a person and not just a patient,” says Christensen, who will start classes at the University of Minnesota Medical School Twin Cities this fall.

Christensen was part of a pilot of a creative writing course that will be offered to undergraduates at St. Benedict’s and its partner institution, Saint John’s University, for the first time this fall. The course is designed for students who are pursuing health care careers. “The goal is to immerse them in the writing life, so it will help them communicate more precisely with patients in the future,” says Christopher Bolin, M.F.A., an English instructor who developed and will teach the course.

Few opportunities for undergrads

Bolin says he became interested in the connection between medicine and the humanities while he and his wife, a physician’s assistant, were studying creative writing in graduate school at the University of Iowa. “We both noticed some areas of crossover, particularly when it comes to communicating about a difficult health condition,” he says. “It became clear that a lot of what we learned in the MFA program using the workshop model would really aid clinicians.”

In order to further explore this area, Bolin attended the Examined Life Conference at the University of Iowa in 2011. The conference focuses on the connection between the science of medicine and the art of writing.

“I looked around and saw programs for medical students, residents, attending physicians, but there seemed to be a dearth of programming for undergraduates,” he says. “I thought there was every reason to have undergrads start with this kind of arts education, to orient them to this mode of thinking before they get to medical school.”

When he had the opportunity to lead a research project during the summer of 2012, Bolin and two students, one of whom was Christensen, reviewed research that showed how incorporating the humanities into medicine could reduce hypertension and decrease pain among patients, improve their overall health and,
in some cases, reduce costs. They also looked at how programs that married the arts and health care, most of which were aimed at patients and health care providers, worked. From there, they developed a course outline.

Bolin also reached out to Tom Leither, M.D., medical director of CentraCare’s Kidney Program and the father of a former classmate. Bolin explained his idea for teaching premed and other students about poetry and creative writing, and then having them share what they learned with patients.

Leither liked the idea and paired his young patient with Christensen to test it in the fall of that year. “Dialysis patients are ideal for this experiment,” he says. “They have very significant chronic disease burden and they have time: 12 to 24 hours per week sitting, getting their dialysis treatment, fighting boredom. They have a lot going on in their physical and emotional lives and can potentially benefit from introspection and enhanced agility in being able to organize their feelings into thoughts and express those thoughts in spoken and written words.”

More meaningful words
This fall, six students will take the course. In the classroom, they will learn about the value of the humanities in medicine and how to connect creative writing to medical practice. In addition, they will learn about metaphor and imagery and how to express themselves more precisely. “Metaphor is tricky,” Bolin says. “It breaks down easily if you’re not incredibly precise, and if you’re not precise, your patients won’t understand their conditions.”

Students will then be paired with patients with whom they will share the lessons they learn in class. (Leither says he plans to pair students with patients in the dialysis unit. He also hopes to involve patients from the CentraCare Coburn Cancer Center and residents of a local nursing facility.) Both student and patient then will write poetry based on those lessons.

The objectives of the program, when met, can be mutually beneficial. For students, the goal is to become better able to describe what happens to the body when it is diseased, how a treatment works and what a patient might expect. For patients, it’s to be able to more precisely describe what’s happening to their body, whether they’re experiencing pain and what it feels like, and how they are feeling emotionally.

“Communication is vitally important to healing, and its one of the most essential parts of being a health care provider,” Leither says. “All of our education seems to be so focused and so ‘exclusive’ in being directed toward the skills you need to pursue the science of your career, sometimes to the exclusion of things like the humanities, communication and art.” He believes learning such skills as undergraduates will ultimately produce physicians who are better communicators.

Christensen, who graduated in May with a degree in philosophy and who hadn’t done any creative writing previously, says working with the young woman in the dialysis unit gave her insight into what patients go through—an experience she thinks will help her in her studies. “As a medical student and provider, it will help me keep in mind the way patients experience things as people. They’re not just dealing with disease processes. They’re dealing with something that affects their quality of life and how they live their lives.” MM

Kim Kiser is an editor of Minnesota Medicine.
Public health and art students share lessons

Public health and art students at Hamline University in St. Paul had a chance to learn how their fields intersect last spring.

Sixteen participated in a new class, in which they learned about neuroscience and took part in art activities. They developed their observational and analytical skills by writing about pieces of art including some from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the New York University School of Medicine, the British Library and the Center for the History of Medicine at Harvard University. They also did group painting and tried responding to questions with drawings rather than words. In addition, they learned about installing art exhibits in settings where safety and infection control are concerns.

As part of their final project, students created a lesson plan. They also exhibited some of their work at Hamline.

After they finished the course, about half chose to do internships at Children's Hospitals and Clinics Minnesota and Shriners Hospitals for Children in St. Paul, where they worked with patients and their siblings to create art.

“This immersive experience allows [students] to connect public health concepts as they gain experience in the hospital,” says Nicola Demonte, who created the class and is teaching a second session this summer. –K.K.

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**Are Your Patients Ready?**

Minnesota’s New Immunization Law Goes into Effect 9/1/14

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**Immunizations recommended but not required:**

- **Influenza**: Annually for all children age 4 months and older.
- **Human papillomavirus (HPV)**: In females age 16 years and older.

Call in patients who need vaccines. Use the Minnesota Immunization Information Connection (MIIC) to identify children who still need shots. For more information, contact your MIIC regional coordinator:

www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/immunize/registry/map.html

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A piece created by Hamline student Josie Slater.