Mayo Clinic pulmonologist Paul Scanlon rarely has time to come up for air, between caring for patients in the intensive care unit, seeing others who are critically ill, and directing research at Mayo’s Pulmonary Function Laboratory and Pulmonary Clinical Research Center. But he tries to make time regularly to take in a concert, attend a writing workshop, or listen to a humanities lecture at Mayo.

He uses these small moments in his busy workday to tap into another side of himself—the side that majored in humanities at the University of Minnesota and that enjoys art and architecture.

“It keeps me sane. It’s fun and enjoyable and stimulating in a totally different way than my practice of medicine,” says Scanlon, who has chaired Mayo’s Humanities in Medicine committee since 2003. “It keeps me connected and involved in the community. And to the extent that stimulating other parts of the brain improves your quality of life and productivity and ability to focus on your work, it has helped in that regard, too.”

The notion of using art to promote healing is one the medical community has embraced for the past two decades, responding to growing body of research showing that it can reduce patients’ anxiety, help them control their pain and increase their satisfaction. In recent years, though, many health care organizations, including Mayo Clinic, have started incorporating the humanities into the workplace as well as into patient care.

They, along with medical schools, are trying to bring art back into the science of medicine. “Since the late 19th century, the scientific basis of medical practice has been strengthened and some feel that perhaps we have lost, or are at risk of losing, a bit of the ‘art and soul’ of medicine in the process,” says Johanna Rian, coordinator of Mayo’s Center for Humanities in Medicine.

Mayo is now reaching out to future and practicing physicians through the arts, building on its long history of doing the same for patients and the community through concerts, displays of its extensive collections of paintings and sculptures, and therapeutic use of dance, music, art and writing.

Unlocking one’s creative side helps doctors and medical students work through some of the emotions—positive and negative—that come from being deeply involved in patients’ lives. That unburdening can have a therapeutic effect on their own well-being and help them be better physicians.

“Many studies have shown that physicians who are involved with the arts can be perceived by patients as more empathetic. They are better listeners and communicators,” Rian says. “It also can help them achieve work/life balance and avoid burnout and stress.”

Read on to learn about a few of the ways Mayo is encouraging physicians to tap their creative side.
Literature in medicine

Once a month, a dozen Mayo Clinic physicians, residents, medical students and administrators come together for an interpretive reading and writing workshop called Literature in Medicine. Led by a facilitator from the Center for Humanities in Medicine, the participants read an excerpt from a work of fiction, a poem, a part of a play or an essay that often relates to health, illness or medicine. The facilitator then asks a thought-provoking question about what they just read and gives them about 10 minutes to respond.

Next the group comes together to discuss both the reading and the writing it inspired. It’s a way for participants to gain exposure to different authors while also using their creativity to release some of their pent-up emotions or feelings about work, notes Rian, who is one of the facilitators.

“It helps them connect with a part of themselves that is too often silent and buried in the course of the average work day,” she says. “There is so much pressure to see so many patients and move through all the red tape and paperwork that there seldom is time to be reflective. Those of us who write know how healing the act of writing is. This offers them some breathing space within themselves.”

Rian learned narrative medicine, an approach that ascribes honoring the stories of illness, from Rita Charon, M.D., director of the Humanities and Medicine program at Columbia University in New York. Charon spoke at Mayo last year about how the narrative medicine approach can help physicians and medical students develop their ability to reflect and increase their capacity for empathy.

It’s something medical student Rachel Hammer takes to heart. A Literature in Medicine facilitator, Hammer is re-entering Mayo Medical School as a third-year after taking time off to earn an MFA in creative nonfiction from Seattle Pacific University. She finds it cathartic to express herself through writing and process some of the experiences from her training.

“The emotional collateral damage sustained by those working in the health professions is great,” she says. “Literature in Medicine sessions provide a safe space for reflection on how patients’ stories of loss and trauma brush up against our own.”

In one of Hammer’s recent sessions, she shared an excerpt from Mark Doty’s lyrical book-length essay “Still Life with Oysters and Lemon.” In it, Doty explores the interplay between the big picture and the small details of a painting and a life. Hammer juxtaposed the ideas in Doty’s essay with taking a patient history, which requires weaving together a comprehensive personal narrative from snippets of information. She prompted participants to describe a clinical encounter where they could have taken a longer gaze at a patient’s life instead of just noting their symptoms that day. “It’s a time for them to capture situations they wouldn’t necessarily take time to capture otherwise,” she explains.

**Humanities courses for medical students**

In recent years, medical schools have used the arts to teach students about providing patient-centered care, harnessing their compassion and improving their communication skills.

Mayo medical students have a menu of electives to consider as part of the curricu-
lum. Called selectives, these are week-long classes and experiences that go beyond clinical education. Among the offerings are Humanities for the Physician in Training, Telling the Patient’s Story and Narrative Medicine. Students also can do a visual arts independent study as a selective.

Scanlon believes it’s important to teach humanities to medical students because it helps them obtain full-circle knowledge of human culture. He likes to quote 16th-century French surgeon Ambroise Paré, who noted that “the art of medicine is to cure sometimes, to relieve often, and to comfort always.” Adds Scanlon, “The part about comfort is where the arts come in.”

For Diem Vu, who just completed her first year of medical school at Mayo, the humanities selectives she took allowed her to probe her experiences while unleashing her creativity.

For Vu, who minored in creative writing while she majored in molecular cell biology at Johns Hopkins University, the experience of taking the narrative medicine selective was like no other, as she got more individual attention from writing instructors than she ever did during her undergraduate studies. As part of the selective, Vu wrote poetry (see “Dissection Day 8” and “Scars,” p. 17).

Humanities for the Physician in Training introduced Vu to experiences that pushed her outside her comfort zone. During one of the sessions, the executive director of the Commonweal Theater in Lanesboro used improvisation and movement to teach participants how to interact with patients and other physicians.

Vu found the acting instruction directly applicable to practicing medicine, explaining that improv skills come in handy when working with a patient whose condition is rapidly changing. The movement exercises have also helped her make a strong first impression with patients. “We had exercises where we practiced being centered and conveying confidence and competence when walking into a room,” she says.

“That’s especially important for physicians because the physician-patient relationship starts when you enter an exam room.”

CME events for physicians

For many physicians, continuing medical education can be less than engaging. In order to change that, Mayo recently teamed with the Guthrie Theater to teach physicians and other providers about addiction and mental illness. The first CME event, held at the Guthrie in May 2012, came about because Mark Frye, M.D., who chairs Mayo’s Psychiatry and Psychology Department, wanted to delve into mood disorders through the work of Mary Pat Gleason, a movie and television actress who wrote a play about her struggle with bipolar disorder called “Stopping Traffic.”

Participants listened to speakers, including Kay Redfield Jamison, a clinical psychologist who wrote The Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness about her experience of having bipolar disorder, and then saw a performance/presentation about depression by Mayo psychologist Kristin Vickers Douglas. Using material she created for the CME event, Douglas presented three first-person monologues detailing a husband, a wife and a daughter’s experiences with having a loved one with a mood disorder. Later in the day, participants watched Gleason perform her one-woman show, which was followed by a discussion.

Mayo’s goal was to make physicians more aware of the symptoms of mental illness and the deep impact it has on patients’ lives, explains Tim Lineberry, M.D., a psychiatrist and associate professor of psychiatry at Mayo.

“These illnesses are often missed or not treated adequately,” he says. “Having a deeper understanding of the emotional impact of depression, mania, substance abuse or other mental illnesses can help physicians form an empathetic understanding of what the patient is going through… and focus on the importance of treatment.”

Lineberry notes that hearing about individuals’ experiences with mood disorders brought to life on stage hit home with many of the CME participants. “A number of physicians said it was the most powerful learning experience they’ve ever had for continuing education,” he says. “It was so different from the way they usually do it.”

The event was so successful that Mayo hosted a second CME event at the Guthrie in January. That one used Eugene O’Neill’s masterpiece “Long Day’s Journey Into Night,” about a family’s struggle with alcoholism and substance abuse, as a vehicle to talk about addiction. Kathleen Brady, M.D., a psychiatry professor from the University of South Carolina, and other speakers discussed the biological basis of addiction, differences between addiction in men and women, and cutting-edge treatments. The event also featured actress Melissa Gilbert, who spoke about her and her family’s experience with addiction.

Lineberry says Mayo plans to offer more theater-based CME programs in the future. “It works well with psychiatric illness and syndromes in particular because they are depicted often in drama and people can connect with them,” he says. “When things are emotionally powerful, they stick with you. It’s just good learning if you can make them real.”

Rian says Mayo will expand its arts-focused CMEs to other departments while continuing to add workshops and classes for physicians and students. “It’s about finding a balance between left and right brain, and arts and science,” she says. MM

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