The art of medicine

When I was a medical student, much was said about the “art of medicine.” The implication was that while medicine is based on science, the application of that science is an art. That has always seemed the case for me. The physician with the most encyclopedic fund of knowledge is not always the one who can best apply it. A good surgeon knows anatomy, masters the technical skills and capably does surgery. A brilliant surgeon uses his knowledge and training to create and innovate; he is the artist. A pediatrician who counsels the family of a critically ill child and calms their fears, an oncologist who relays the risks and benefits of a therapeutic regimen or the urologist who encounters an anatomic aberration and adapts. All are artists.

Yet, some say the idea of medicine as an art is outdated; that with the emphasis on applying evidence-based protocols, practicing medicine is sometimes nothing more than checking boxes.

So are they right? Has the artistry involved in building a relationship with the patient been supplanted by a list of symptoms plugged into a computer that spits out a differential diagnosis ranked ordered by likelihood? If so, will human physicians go the way of the dodo? I don’t think so; but to test my theory, I went to the place most likely to supply our replacement—the app store: Is there a doctor-substitute app?

A search of “doctor” in the app store yields a number of games, phone battery doctors, and inexplicably, a celebrity guessing game featuring Justin Bieber (Doctor Love, maybe?). There were a couple of sites that connect patients with virtual physicians. For $40, “Doctor on Demand” lets you consult with a real doctor about your medical issue. The reviewers loved it. The majority of them got the antibiotic prescription they wanted after a simple email without the hassles of an actual physical exam.

“iTriage” appears closest to a doctor substitute. You type in your symptoms and it supplies a differential diagnosis. Typing in “headache,” I learned that common causes included tension and cluster headaches, migraine, sinusitis and anxiety disorder. Other causes ranged from essential hypertension, porphyria and PMS to “critical” ones like brain tumor, hypertensive emergency and encephalitis. I was given 58 possible diagnoses. If my headache was caused by anxiety, it just got worse. The site also allowed a search of conditions, medications, procedures, health news, local doctors and health care facilities. Interested in anoscopy? iTriage described it and listed physicians who performed it, possible complications and average costs, and linked me to images and YouTube videos. It also allowed me to share what I learned with my friends and family, presumably so they would all know I had a special interest in anoscopy.

The bottom line is that art, like science, changes over time but is always needed. Any computer can spit out a list, but it takes a physician to sift, separate, translate, communicate and humanize the possibilities. That is the art. Thankfully, there is a little bit of Michelangelo in us all.