

left brain, right brain, whole brain

Engaging in
the arts helps
physicians
bring
creativity
and balance
to their work
and lives

BY SUZY FRISCH

When Paul Scanlon, MD, cares for ICU patients who are teetering between life and death, it takes all of his abilities to get them out of danger. But it's not just his expertise and training in critical medicine and pulmonology that he calls on—Scanlon taps into his creativity to discover what is making the patients so ill and find solutions that work.

Practicing medicine melds the realms of art and science, often requiring ingenuity and exploration to turn scientific facts into diagnoses and treatments. “People tend to think about medicine as being scripted and a lot of rote memory, but it’s a very creative process,” says Scanlon, who recently completed a 10-year stint as chair of Mayo Clinic’s Humanities in Medicine Committee. “That creative process is nurtured by playing music, creating or enjoying the visual arts or writing.”

Creative pursuits and medicine are similar in a number of ways. Both require deep concentration, a mastery of skills and the need for practitioners to practice what they practice. Often, physicians who participate in the arts find that their creative side helps them be better doctors and that being a doctor helps them be better artists.

“It’s good for you in a lot of ways. It’s good for your soul and it makes your attitude better, and it particularly makes your brain work better,” Scanlon says. “There’s very good evidence that the arts use a variety of pathways in your brain. It’s not by coincidence that most Nobel Laureates and smart people in general have interests outside of their areas of expertise.”

Many physicians engage in the arts before, during and after medical careers. It’s a way to satisfy their curiosity with the world around them and share what they learned from helping patients through life’s ups and downs.

Connecting with their emotions through art can refine physicians’ abilities to closely observe people, develop mindfulness

and deepen their empathy for both patients and themselves, says David Power, MD, a University of Minnesota family medicine physician and professor who co-teaches an elective in medicine and the arts.

Engaging in the humanities serves as an outlet after a tough day or as a way to process experiences with patients. It brings balance to life and the science-focused brain, says Power, who paints and draws. “For me, the experience of drawing is a whole other problem to solve compared to a patient-care problem. It’s taking time to allow my brain to think about this and it feels different. It’s relaxing.”

For physicians, he says, “The arts are an attempt to balance the stress and busy-ness and the other side of our brain. We need to take steps to heal ourselves.”

Through this healing and expression, physicians can show the world their whole selves.

A music man

As a young adult, Christopher Jankowski, MD, envisioned first a career in music, and then turning to medicine. But the trumpet player loved jazz, composing and arranging music so much that he put his science education on the backburner and dove more deeply into the arts.

He earned bachelor’s degrees in music and music education from Lawrence University and then steeped himself in the music scene. But after four years, Jankowski realized he wanted more.

As passionate as he was about music, he sought a career that challenged him intellectually and really helped others. Now an anesthesiologist at Mayo Clinic, Jankowski brings a jazz musician’s focus and ability to improvise to his work in the operating room. He specializes in acute care surgeries and liver transplants.

Jankowski incorporates music into his life in many ways. He plays trumpet with the Rochester Symphony and Chorale, the Rochester Chamber Music Society and many other groups around his community. Jankowski served on the Symphony board for six years, two as president. He is a regular at the week-long Tritone Jazz Fantasy Camp in Door County, Wisconsin, where he immerses himself in master classes and jam sessions with professional musicians.

“There are clear parallels between jazz playing and medicine,” Jankowski says. “In jazz, you have to react immediately to what’s going on around you. In the operating room it’s a team effort where you’re interacting with the surgeon and critical care team and making decisions based on what’s happening around you.”

Jankowski thought he was headed toward a career in primary care. But after he completed rotations in surgery, anesthesiology, and critical care during medical school at the University of Rochester in New York, he was drawn to the immediacy of the work and to being able to provide critical care at a vital time. Already matched to the Mayo Clinic for an internal medicine residency, Jankowski made the switch to anesthesiology.

Though he didn’t play much music during medical school—there just wasn’t time—he did pick up his trumpet again during

Christopher Jankowski, MD

PHOTO BY SHAWN FAGAN OF FAGAN STUDIOS



residency. Eventually, Jankowski auditioned for the Rochester Symphony and won a spot, and he's been playing with the organization since 1994.

Music gives Jankowski the opportunity to focus on something he loves outside of work. He practices every day before work and sometimes in the evening as well. Leading up to an orchestra concert, Jankowski often doubles and triples his efforts to polish his performance.

Playing trumpet has been a vital way for Jankowski to mitigate the burnout that notoriously affects anesthesiologists. "Music has helped keep me grounded. In our specialty it's easy to get caught up in the mechanics of anesthesiology and surgery," he says. "Even if there are times I feel burned out, music helps put things back in perspective for me and reminds me that we're interacting with patients who need care."

The doctor will entertain you now

Tom Combs' career has come full circle. An avid reader who was leaning toward a writing career, Combs, MD, eventually decided to pursue work where he could make an immediate difference—and emergency rooms are great places to

make a difference for extremely ill and injured people.

Combs spent 25 years caring for patients from all walks of life, with all manner of problems, in urban Level One trauma center emergency rooms. Then he became a patient himself. In 2007, Combs went to his own ER at North Memorial Health Hospital with a subarachnoid hemorrhage that wreaked havoc on his brain. He spent 10 days in a neuro intensive care unit and about a year recovering from the aneurysm.

Through intense rehabilitation, Combs returned to normal, regaining almost all of his abilities—except the extreme multitasking and operational memory needed in the ER. One way he rehabbed his in-

jured brain was through writing, and that revived his long-time interest in storytelling. Over several years and through many classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, Combs honed his craft.

"I am inspired by great writing," Combs says. "As I became rehabilitated, I thought it was my chance to investigate and see if I have fiction-writing skills." The writing process was really therapeutic for me, helping me work on my memory issues while crafting a mystery thriller."

Now he's on Chapter Two of his career. Combs published the medical suspense book *Nerve Damage* in 2014, just seven years after his aneurysm, and followed up with two others. The books have garnered positive reviews and rankings as Amazon Kindle bestsellers of medical thrillers.

Starring Drake Cody, an emergency medicine physician and medical researcher, the series delves into some of most significant issues of the day, including the opioid epidemic and medical malpractice. Combs is inspired by the patients, clinicians, medical problems and terminology that were a daily part of his work, making them the backdrop to suspenseful, taut stories.

"Emergency departments are high-acuity places that are a reflection of life," Combs says. "You are often deeply involved in the most high-stakes, challenging, emotion-laden events of people's lives. That drama was something I was constantly exposed to for 25 years."

Combs enjoys the process of creating an intricately layered thriller. And he loves to introduce readers to medical issues and write stories with a high-level of medical knowledge. Writing medical thrillers also keeps him in touch with the profession, co-workers and patients he loved.

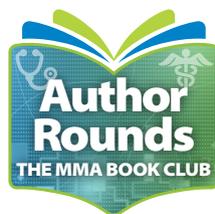
"I miss it. By writing what I know, I still feel like I'm part of medicine," says Combs, who enjoys the intellectual challenge of crafting a suspenseful, layered plot, then hearing from readers that they loved his books. "I love giving them that wonderfully satisfying experience that I have when I read a really good book." MM

Suzy Frisch is a Twin Cities freelance writer.

Tom Combs, MD



PHOTO PROVIDED BY TOM COMBS, MD



Tom Combs, MD, will discuss his book Nerve Damage as the featured

author for Author Rounds: The MMA Book Club event, July 23 7–8:30pm at Open Book, 1011 Washington Ave. S., Minneapolis. Carolyn McClain, MD, emergency medicine physician, will host the event, which will include networking and time for questions from attendees. Register through Events on the MMA website.