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The Importance of Encompassing Medical History in Pre-Medicine

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ABSTRACT This essay presents an argument on the integration of medical humanities in pre-medical undergraduate curriculum. This project culminated from an assignment of the Drawing II course in the spring 2018 semester, which included a short paper on a research topic of interest, and a drawing.

Keywords: medical humanities, pre-medicine, undergraduates, drawing

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The Importance of Encompassing Medical History in Pre-Medicine

The world was known to me, or in other words taught to me, through distinctly categorized subjects and scheduled classes. History, biology, politics, and chemistry were separated by all means: teachers, textbooks, methods of teaching, methods of learning, resources, and so on. I visually imagined the concept of knowledge as a pile of large boxes with each box containing distinct sets of information based on the subject. Over the course of my educational life, I realized that in order to truly experience that pile and to truly see the world, I would have to let the boxes disintegrate and allow the mound to freely exist as a mesh of information. The course of the education I received from the university led me to pursue this learning style, known as the interdisciplinary approach towards learning. This interdisciplinary approach can teach students to view and assess the world through multiple lenses. Integrating medical history into the pre-medicine track can provide students with a comparative understanding on how medicine interplays with culture, politics, and socioeconomic structure of a time period, which can then better shape one's philosophical approach towards medicine.



Figure 1: Illustration composed by the author using pencil.

Pre-medical students are constantly under pressure to delve deeper and wider into cell biology, human physiology, and molecular biology. In my observation, I have seen pre-med students get lost in their highly detailed and rigorous subjects of study. Getting lost in that vastness of information is not necessarily bad; certainly, one must have a proper understanding on the subject and prove their capacity to comprehend the information in order to get into a medical program. However, it is also important to occasionally take a step back and get a glimpse of the overall vastness in which medicine lies. After all, the vastness is a mesh, where every subject is interlaced and connected through affecting and influencing each other.

Medicinal knowledge has shown to influence and shape the politics of each era. Many ancient societies, whose core beliefs were surrounded by monarchy, myths, and mysticism, influenced the medicinal practices of those societies. For example, the diagnostic and treatment methods of these societies contained elements of religion and superstition. The roles and status of those physicians were quite different from what they are now. In many ancient cultures, physicians were considered the authorities of God and the guardians of health because they healed and saved the people.

Along with this social role, power dynamics came into play. The possession of such indirect powers over the ruling system aided the physicians to stimulate social developments. Such examples are also visible in modern day societies. The solutions and preventative tactics found through public health crises often serve as means by which public health policies get altered or formed. The influences of medical industries on politics and the interplay of power dynamics between them function hand in hand towards the forward movement of our humanity.

This illustrates how the ability to see the bigger picture is just as important as the ability to delve into the intricate details. Students often consider the latter difficult, but the former requires a whole different process of understanding. Students often underestimate the importance of knowing the bigger picture of medicine and it is understandable why this happens. The institutional system encourages systematic focus on each discipline in order to better learn the subject. Therefore, the other unrelated subjects, such as philosophy, ethics, and history might seem useless, distracting, boring, or even time-consuming for the medicine-oriented students.

This underestimation of the humanities in the pre-medicine curriculum is bothersome. Learning medical history is important for pre-medicine students because studying a subject under multiple lens and contexts can help one assess his/her mental framework and point of view. It can help one realize the significance of context-based interpretation of issues, and it can reduce discrepancies between physicians' interpretations and patients' understanding of an issue. Lastly, it can aid in reorienting one's philosophical approach towards medicine.

Analyzing an issue from multiple perspectives can help a person assess their standpoint on the issue and to challenge their mental framework. Technically, medical science is supposed to be just about diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of diseases; however, it is often difficult to disentangle the disease component from other components such as socioeconomic background, ethnicity, personal history, and language. Thus, it becomes necessary to utilize additional lenses to look at biomedical issues. According to Courvoisier and Wenger (2005), human sciences – among history, literature and philosophy – are supposed to complete the biomedical point of view by stimulating alternative ways of considering issues in medical practice. Learning the history and philosophy of medicine can help practitioners in dilemmas by distancing themselves from the strictness and specificity of their professional points of view. This can offer alternative medical approaches and solutions.

Distancing oneself from the specificity of one's field can also provide a greater understanding on how it relates to other subjects and concepts. In this case, exploring medicine from outside the realm of science can help students realize how the functions of culture, historical period, and availability of resources affect a population's understanding and interpretation of an experience. For a microscale example, when a patient exhibits non-compliance, it is beneficial to assess the issue from a sociocultural, economical, and historical point of view. An African American patient, for example, could be non-compliant because they mistrust the medical community due to the history of syphilis study in the late 1900s. Through an economical lens, one might also find that a lack of insurance, an inability to cover the treatment costs, or government policies to be the reasons for non-compliance. Analyzing large scale health policies in this way can serve as a macroscale example for this.

Learning medical history can provide a broad scale awareness of the various components at play. Courvoisier and Wenger (2005) suggest that one way to achieve this broad scale awareness is through the process of distancing. The authors underline the idea of distancing and explain that distancing reveals that a natural way to describe a situation does not exist and that a point of view, whether scientific or not, depends on context and culture. This is a significant concept to keep in mind if one wishes to understand and interact with a culturally or generationally dissimilar population. It is also important when establishing and implementing health policies in this modern world.

Understanding how the differences in the structure of medicine over the centuries drove the course of human development and how it can change over time can help shape one's philosophical approach towards medicine. This understanding can bestow a sense of humility and gratitude within the scientists and physicians in our medical community. It can train them to examine the issues under multiple lenses and provide them with a broader and deeper understanding of the professional standards to uphold and their

influences on society.

Dr. Cordell (1904), a professor of the history of medicine at John Hopkins University, addressed the negligence of medical history in medical curriculum in his article. He questioned, “where is our boasted intelligence and superiority; that we do not perceive the danger and folly of such a course; folly in that we deprive our young graduates of the accumulated wisdom and experiences of all ages; danger in that we turn them loose without salutary checks and restraints that such studies afford?” (p. 273 Cordell also quoted Macaulay: “No man who is correctly informed as to the past will be disposed to take a morose and desponding view of the present” (p. 273). Dr. Cordell advocates on the importance of the study of the history of medicine as a course subject for graduate school curriculum, but it should also be considered in undergraduate pre-medical curriculum.

Like many people, I never bothered to learn about the history of medicine. I believed that science prior to the fourteenth century is all about myths and animism, and silly to compare it to what the twenty-first century can offer today. It was the book written by Eadie and Bladin (2001) *A Disease Once Sacred* that changed my perspective on the importance of medical history. The book contained information about the ancient and medieval manifestations of epilepsy, its supernatural and biological interpretations, and the remedies that ancient and medieval people used. This book introduced me to Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, and Rasis, which prompted me to check out dozens of books written by them and about them. During my medical history explorations, I learned that medicine is not just about medicine; but about religion, anthropology, politics, economics, psychology, and mathematics, too. According to John Green (1968), “Human instinct, fear, hope, faith as well as great political and social events of the day, influence medical thought” (p. 3). Indeed, new ideas and discoveries in medicine interplay with important social legislations. Dr. Green (1968) says, “the history of human beings is inseparable from the history of ideas and facts” (p. 3). Medicinal knowledge connects people across cultures and across centuries.

Exploring the history of medicine made me realize that to understand medicine is to understand the differences in drug choices and the socioeconomic factors, how the medical system changes and that it will continue to change overtime, as well as the rights of the people and the ethics of care. Additionally, the history of medicine helps to understand the intergenerational perspectives and intercultural aspects of medicine, and to accept that there are many paths to conducting the right form of medicine. To understand medicine is to feel humility about life and gratitude for all the ways history equips us for a better future. Therefore, the integration of medical history in pre-medicine and the interdisciplinary approach towards medicine can be highly beneficial towards the betterment of this society.

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