THE BIG PICTURE

A dose of history, culture and literature helps Medical Humanities students put the healthcare field into perspective.

William H. Schneider, Director of IUPUI’s Medical Humanities and Health Studies (MHHS) Program, has spent two decades guiding healthcare professionals through the world of literature, ethics and history. Yet he’s still occasionally called upon to justify the usefulness of his work.

“A generous donor to health and hospitals once asked me, ‘Why do we need to know anything about history?’” said Schneider, a Professor of History and Adjunct Professor of Medical and Molecular Genetics. “People want to give doctors the best training possible so they can cure cancer and other diseases, and he thought that whatever detracts from that was not putting their time to its best use.”

Schneider would beg to disagree. He and his MHHS associates believe that helping medical practitioners broaden their educational horizons is a worthy, perhaps even vital, use of their time. The examples found in history, specifically, can help us learn what has worked and what has not. It’s a view shared by many of the program’s former and current participants.

“I’d get incredulous looks all the time when I told people about the program,” said Danielle Lenz, a former MHHS major who’s now at Vanderbilt School of Nursing, pursuing her MSN. “Many were befuddled as to why someone who wants a degree in healthcare would eschew a strictly STEM curriculum in order to read fiction or study foreign cultural practices. But I want to provide whole-person care, and you can only do that if you yourself are a whole person. Incidentally, the No. 1 response I get when I tell a physician or nurse about medical humanities (Usually right after they say ‘What’s that?’) is, ‘Wow, I wish I had known about that.’”
In a nutshell, MHHS helps current and future health professionals ranging from practicing physicians to medical, dental and nursing students develop more nuanced views of their fields by offering medicine- and health-related classes in such diverse areas as literature, ethics and history. The program helps healthcare consumers as well as practitioners understand the field's broader historical and cultural context.

The MHHS program, housed in the School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI and created by Schneider, currently includes about 60 students pursuing it as a major and roughly half as many seeking minors. It's a cross-disciplinary effort, with classes available in departments ranging from anthropology to religious studies to English and geography. The major's core offerings include classes with intriguing names such as Perspectives on Medicine in Film; Culture of Mental Illness—Literary Representations; and The Literature of Addiction. Last fall a Graduate Certificate in Medical Humanities was also added for those in the health field or interested in exploring other options.

During their coursework students may find themselves poring over the works of everyone from Chekov to Tolstoy to Hemingway. Schneider says there's a practical—and timeless—reason for this. Those literary greats often wax eloquent about human frailties, and students can profit from their insights.

"Obviously the best teacher is experience, but what do you do when yours is limited?" Schneider said. "You learn from the experiences of others, and literature and history are great for that."

Not that coursework is confined simply to reading. Over the years MHHS has created some novel synergies between medicine and art, including a program with the somewhat macabre name of Cadaver Speak. A poet, Marianne Boruch, took one semester of gross anatomy (a rite of passage for medical students, in which they learn about the human body by dissecting one). The poet used her experiences to compose a 40-page poem written from the perspective of the deceased 90-year-old woman upon whose body she worked.

"We had a reading of the poem here," Schneider said. "The poet directed the reading, which was done by medical students and some English students. A crowd of about 100 showed up, and the med students were actually the most impressed."

Programs that include some sort of public presentation seem to have an almost cathartic effect on students. For instance, one of MHHS's most popular offerings is a fourth-year class at the IU School of Medicine called Narrative Medicine, in which medical students talk and write about their own professional and academic lives.

"It's not only reading what others have written, but writing their own," Schneider said. "They get a chance to share their own experiences."

That certainly appealed to Evan Torline, a medical student at the University of Louisville who earned an MHHS minor at IUPUI (along with a BS in Biology) during his premed days.

"My favorite part of the program was the discourse," Torline said. "Often in science classes you get stuck on the receiving end of voluminous, one-sided lectures. I enjoyed the opportunity my medical humanities classes gave me to discuss a piece of art, an article, or the implications of some event in history."

Those opportunities, he believes, are serving him well in the real world.

"I believe my training is most impacted by the program when I'm faced with difficult situations," Torline said. "When a patient is dying, I think back to our discussions about death, dying, and mortality. What ethical dilemmas are at stake here? How should I respond as a caring human being? They're difficult questions, but I have previous discussions and experiences to draw from."

The issues that most interest such students are pretty much the same ones that fascinate laymen—as well as scholars and philosophers from all ages. They include...
all of the "big picture" quandaries, such as when life begins and ends, and how much, or whether, a physician should intervene when trying to save a patient. On a more practical note, there's also plenty of study and discussion about the future of medicine.

"Not surprisingly, the students who are just getting ready to go into the profession are the most interested in what the future holds for it," Schneider said. "It's not something that will be decided in a laboratory. It will be determined in the much larger context of politics and social development."

An MHHS minor or major, he and his students contend, can be of use in a broad range of fields, from medicine to health law to public health to public policy studies. One across-the-board benefit is the grounding it offers future physicians and other medical professionals in their field's historical roots—mostly via a history of medicine class that's usually taken by seniors.

"They can step back and take a much broader look at their profession," Schneider said. "Why it's there, what good it does and who they're going to serve. It shows that medicine is not just about molecules and chemicals and formulas. It gives them a better perspective on what they're doing and how they do it."
IUPUI student Daniel Kinsey, a double major in both MHHS and Neuroscience, didn’t have to be sold on the program’s usefulness. It was one of the primary reasons he wanted to attend IUPUI.

“I discovered it sometime during my senior year in high school, and I knew I wanted to major in medical humanities from then on,” Kinsey said. “The program covers such a broad range of subjects that I never get bored. I’m also very interested in ethics, and it focuses heavily on the ethics of medicine.”

The program recently collaborated with Beijing University, which has developed its own medical humanities course of studies. It seems like the idea is catching on everywhere. It certainly has with IUPUI students.

“The program has definitely opened my eyes to the reality of what I’m getting into,” Kinsey said. “I will have the power to literally save lives when I’m older, but doing so is more than just knowing what is physically wrong with the patient. My medical humanities classes are making me a much more empathetic person and are gearing me towards a life devoted to helping people both physically and emotionally.”

**READING LIST**

Want to learn more about the human side of medicine? Here are some of the books medical humanities students read for their coursework.

**The Doctor Stories.** Written by William Carlos Williams, a physician/writer whose stories invite students to consider what it means to be both a doctor and a patient.

**Frankenstein.** Mary Shelley’s classic asks whether technology is always a good thing, and how far is too far when it comes to biomedical/scientific progress.

**The Death of Ivan Ilyich.** Author Leo Tolstoy examines the gritty reality of one man’s painful, solitary demise.

**Being Mortal.** Author Atul Gawande asks us to consider what it means to age and die. How do we treat those nearing the end of life, and how could we treat them better?

**The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down.** A true story by Anne Fadiman about the cultural tension faced by a Hmong family living in the US and struggling to manage their daughter’s epilepsy.

**Case History.** A poem by Dannie Abse examining doctors’ obligations to their patients and how one treats those with whom one fiercely disagrees.

**What the Body Told.** Author Rafael Campo, through striking and sometimes uncomfortable imagery, encourages readers to consider the experience of being an outsider.

**Mercy.** This intense essay by physician Richard Selzer chronicles his struggles over a family’s request to administer a lethal dose of morphine to a pain-wracked victim of end-stage pancreatic cancer.

**Misery.** Anton Chekhov’s masterful story about the nature of grief.