Editor’s Note: In this column, teachers who are currently using literary and artistic materials as part of their curricula will briefly summarize specific works, delineate their purposes and goals in using these media, describe their audience and teaching strategies, discuss their methods of evaluation, and speculate about the impact of these teaching tools on learners (and teachers).

Submissions should be three to five double-spaced pages with a minimum of references. Send your submissions to me at University of California, Irvine, Department of Family Medicine, 101 City Drive South, Building 200, Room 512, Route 81, Orange, CA 92868-3298. 949-824-3748. Fax: 714-456-7984. jfshapir@uci.edu.

Getting the News From Poetry

Dean Gianakos, MD

It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.¹


What news can doctors get from poetry? I recently asked family medicine residents and colleagues this question during a case presentation on polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR). I told them to think about the question while I gave them the latest evidence-based news on PMR. After saying a few words about my patient with PMR—the difficulty she has getting up from a chair, the severe stiffness and pain in her shoulders and hips—I delivered a PowerPoint presentation on the epidemiology, etiology, pathophysiology, and diagnosis of the disease. I discussed the management news in the current rheumatology literature. After 20 minutes, I asked the group again: did you get the news you wanted from my lecture?

A conversation ensued. The group acknowledged I adequately covered new developments in the management of PMR. This type of news obviously cannot be obtained from poems. It is certainly of interest to both patients and physicians, but is it sufficient? What other news is needed? For each person with a new diagnosis of PMR, it—the disease and the experience of living with it—is indeed important news. By listening and encouraging patients to tell their stories, physicians gain knowledge about the experience of illness. By paying attention to language, tone, and affect, physicians attempt to discern the meaning of illness. PMR is experienced differently and uniquely by every person who has it. I made the point that poetry may also have something to say about these experiences. Poems may evince feelings, emotions, and experiences that go beyond the usual platitudes regarding the importance of listening to the patient. For example, in the following poem by Jane Kenyon, the reader learns something about the experience of living with a debilitating illness (eg, untreated PMR) that an expert lecturer cannot provide:

The Sick Wife

The sick wife stayed in the car While he bought a few groceries. Not yet fifty, She had learned what it’s like Not to be able to button a button. It was the middle of the day And so only mothers with small children Or retired couples Stepped through the muddy parking lot. Dry cleaning swung and gleamed on hangers In the cars of the prosperous. How easily they moved— With such freedom,
Even the old and relatively infirm.
The windows began to steam up.
The cars on either side of her
Pulled away so briskly
That it made her sick at heart.2

A summary of the poem may go
something like this: a frail woman
observes, from inside a car, the
activity, energy, and vibrant life
around her in the middle of a park-
ing lot as her own life shrinks.
Immobile, sick, and, finally, unable
to watch because she is huffing and
puffing so much that the windows
steam up, the empathic reader bet-
ter understands what it’s like to be
so sick. The summary, of course,
is no substitute for what the poem
conveys by itself—that is, the truth
and suffering of another human
being.

I then returned to a discussion
of William Carlos Williams. I said
a few words about Dr Williams’
medical career (he practiced family
medicine and obstetrics in Patter-
son, NJ, in the early 20th century).3
His practice inspired his poetry
and stories. He believed there was
plenty to learn from a patient that
no book could teach. Being in the
patient’s presence—truly present,
attending closely to the patient’s
words and gestures—mattered
greatly to Williams and to his
patients. He tried to communicate
the importance of presence in his
poems.

In the opening lines, what did Dr
Williams mean by the “news from
poetry?” They are taken from a
love poem he wrote for his wife,
Flossie.

The poem encourages the per-
ceptive reader to think more deeply
about one particular word: news.
What counts for news? We may
not get the latest treatment news
in a poem, but there may be other
news that is valuable to a physician
reader: news that gives meaning
to one’s life or news that provides
understanding of another human
being’s predicament and experience
of illness. That’s certainly valuable
to a physician! Williams challenges
us to think about what a poem can
teach us and how a poem may possi-
bly save our lives, quite literally, by
discovering a truth within the poem
that provides inspiration to endure
life’s tragedies, or figuratively, by
rescuing us from the tediousness
of everyday life. Poetry may help
us to see beauty and truth in simple
things that we previously missed or
ignored. Just as physicians pay at-
tention to the nuanced expressions
of their patients, readers of poetry
must do the same.

Williams may have intended an-
other meaning in the above lines: it
is difficult to get the news (the truth)
in poems because poetry inter-
pretation can be a demanding task. It
takes time, study, and practice to
master poetry interpretation, in the
same way it takes time, study, and
practice to decipher the meaning
behind the words and stories of
patients. Both activities—reading
poetry and reading patients—re-
quires an active imagination and
empathic concern.

My presentation was an experi-
ment in using poetry to supplement
a lecture on a particular medical
topic. I believe the talk provided
the hard facts found in the medical
literature and the hard truths found
in poetry. It stressed the equal im-
portance of learning about the latest
medical news and the latest news
about the patient’s experience of
illness. There are truths in poems,
things that can help physicians heal
their patients—and themselves.

Poems can be found to illustrate
and supplement almost any medical
topic. I plan to continue this use of
poetry to enhance my lectures and
case presentations.

Correspondence: Address correspondence to
Dr Gianakos, Lynchburg Family Medicine
Residency, 2097 Langhorne Road, Lynchburg,
deangianakos@yahoo.com.

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