Medical humanities at Ghent University: a student's point of view

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“Treat with respect the power you have to form an opinion.” — Marcus Aurelius

Medical Humanities: difficult to define

- **Common point of view:**
  - Medical Humanities concerns the use of arts, social science and humanities in health care and, more recently and importantly, in health professions education.

- **No consensus yet:**
  - Understanding Medical Humanities is a difficult, never-ending story. Consensus hasn’t been reached yet.
  - Around the world, medical schools translate their own understanding of the concept into different courses, with different idealistic goals.

Vague objectives, rather than a narrow definition

No official goals could be found. We believe our teachers understand Medical Humanities as follows:

- **It…**
  - provides insight into the human being, condition, suffering and responsibility to each other.
  - provides insight into interactions between own living environment, medical practice, culture and patients’ experiences.
  - helps to develop skills of observation, empathy and self-reflection, which are essential for humane medical care.
  - shows medical students that there are many ways to see the world, many rational methodologies to reach the truth and many truths about people and their behaviour which are not revealed by the usual medical classes.

  ► Ultimate goal: delivering medical doctors with human and humane understanding, knowledge, skills and experience.

Medical Humanities at Ghent University

Concrete design in continuous evolution

Training in Medical Humanities is part of a ‘Exploration-continuum’ (E-line), running through the course of medical school, in which ethics, alternative medicine, communication, etc. are taught.

**Year 1 to 4: Studium Generale**

- Lectures about social, political or philosophical topics, e.g. philosophy of science, globalization, (over)use of antibiotics, etc.
- Guest-speakers are all experts, not necessarily medical doctors.
  ► Students are challenged to think out of the “medical box” and develop critical thinking skills.

**Year 5: formal Medical Humanities-programme: 3 options**

- Through a tutorial, a general theme (e.g. pain) is approached from a humane point of view. Results are presented in a plenary presentation.
- Preparing an interdisciplinary discussion between a humanist and bioscientist (e.g. poet and anesthetist) in cooperation with literature students and the Museum Dr. Guislain.
- Preparing a presentation about e.g. pain and literature in cooperation with literature students and the Museum Dr. Guislain.
  ► Students are stimulated to reflect about links between medicine and humanities.

Student’s reflections

- We acknowledge the importance of the objectives of Medical Humanities. In order to reach them more efficiently, the objectives should be outlined clearly. Being open-minded, broadly educated and able to apply non-medical knowledge and experiences into daily medical practice indeed seem to be valuable characteristics in our society.
- Some fundamental personal virtues were already (and more appropriately?) instilled by our parents, at school, and the critical and humane environment that motivated us towards medical school. They shouldn’t be repeated this extensive in our professional education, which is already demanding.
- Participation in the Medical Humanities shouldn’t be compulsory. The majority of students encounters Medical Humanities regularly in his/her free time.
- We believe the most powerful way students are taught professional and personal values and virtues is by immersion into a reflective, intrinsic human educational atmosphere, where a non-medical point of view can be valued too.

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