Reviewer's report

Title: Humanities for medical students? A qualitative study of a medical humanities curriculum in a medical school program.

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Reviewer: johanna F shapiro

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General: "Humanities for medical students?..." [C. Wachtler, S. Lundin, and M. Troein] is a theoretically based analysis, grounded in derridean deconstruction and post-structuralism, of the relationship between ideology and praxis in the introduction of humanities curriculum in a medical school educational program. Despite limitations, such as restriction of the data set to a single institution and the small number of students participating in the interview process, it addresses critical issues of differential power and value in all enterprises involving the integration of the humanities and medicine. Its identification of a significant chasm between an ideology that propounds an interdisciplinary, egalitarian academic exchange, in practice the humanities are defined and utilized within a hierarchical medical frame of reference where their position is clearly subordinate and devalued.

The great strength of this paper is in the nature of the overall question it poses. The research attempts to examine the hidden assumptions, values, and power relationships inherent in bringing together the humanities and medicine in a curricular relationship. I have read countless articles about the role of the humanities in medical education, but I have never seen the problems articulated with this level of conceptual clarity rooted in a sound theoretical framework.

The methods used, basically an ethnographic approach combining textual analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, are well-suited to the research question being investigated. The participatory observation method in particular is well-described. The data obtained are relevant to the research question, and are presented in a clear and accessible fashion. The quotes support the points made in the narrative and add depth and credibility. The data analysis, "hermeneutic editing," is appropriate to the data sets identified in the study, and in general the conclusions are supported by the data. However, the study design itself is somewhat limited by its restriction to a single institution, by the selection of only a single course for participant observation, and by the fact that the in-depth interviews were confined to only 5 subjects. These restrictions constrain to some degree the reader's ability to accept the credibility and trustworthiness of the authors' conclusions.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study is well worth considering because it highlights the discrepancy between an ideology of equality among the humanities and medicine and the practice of hierarchical power and differential value that comprises at least an aspect of the reality of many actual medical humanities programs. Of great importance is that the article reveals the unidirectional flow of influence, i.e., of the humanities as a means to certain ends in medicine. As a result, despite medical students regarding the experience overall as positive and feeling that they were changed for the better by it, they simultaneously persisted in the belief that the content of what they had learned was “fun” rather than essential, and not as “serious” as the rest of their medical education. Absorption of such values may explain why exposure to the humanities often appears to have difficulty in exerting a sustainable influence on medical learners’ methods of critical thinking and empathic analysis. Given these realities, the authors’ call for “equal standing and contribution” among the scientific and humanities-based disciplines is timely and well-founded.
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

What was the reason for not studying other medical humanities courses offered? Was this purely a pragmatic decision? Was there an assumption that the experience in this one class was emblematic of the experience of other courses? Why was this particular course selected as the focus of the study? I would also like more information on the technique used to recruit the 5 students who participated in the in-depth interviews. Since, apart from the participant-observation of one of the authors, the interviews constituted the praxis component of the study, the number (one-sixth of the students enrolled) seems small. Is this merely a sample of convenience? Did these students represent both mainstream and outlier perspectives?

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

p. 3, para 1, line 3, reference should be numbered; p. 3, second line from bottom "we" should be deleted; p. 5, para 2, line 3 should read "texts were coded line by line by hand"; p. 12, second line from bottom should probably read "being studied" rather than "at study."

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests