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How does Medical/Health Humanities Prepare Healthcare Learners for a Changing World?

Abstract:
Health humanities is a multidisciplinary field which strives to explore and honor both the particular, individual experience of health and illness as well as the connections across diverse perspectives in order to elucidate universal aspects of the human condition. Similarly, healthcare itself is a balancing act between attention to the patient before one, and categorizing the constellation of symptoms and signs as part of a larger diagnostic template and therapeutic regimen. Such tensions between the particular and the generalizable in biomedical education are frequently missed in preclinical education where massive amounts of information are transmitted to students who are then tested on seemingly definitive data. Furthermore, any individual health care professional will see a subset of the variety of disease presentations and responses to treatments over the course of training and a career. Health humanities education can provide tools to expand our horizons, sharpen perception and observation skills, and acknowledge and analyze the impact of ambiguity in medicine. For example, language, story and point of view inform experience, memory and communication; health humanities education examines how such studying such concepts impacts healthcare itself.

As knowledge bases expand, lines blur between what is human and what is not, end-of-life options multiply, socioeconomic pressures complicate health disparities, technologic boons create opportunity and alienation, and prejudice and conflict confound efforts to improve global health, the future of healthcare can appear daunting, to say the least. Health humanities embraces the dynamic changes in our world as a means of reflecting on where we've been, where we might be going, and possible consequences of such changes.

Health humanities education can also be useful for promoting and celebrating creativity, engagement and wellness. Health humanities addresses the emotional costs and stresses of providing healthcare and can provide models and frameworks for developing a sense of community and reflective practices. Far from a cure-all, health humanities instead encourages humility, respect, lifelong learning and critical thinking – all of which may prove useful throughout the accelerated changes we will inevitably experience.