Medical Humanities – Serious Academic Pursuit or Doorway to Dilettantism?

Despite increasing interest in incorporating Medical Humanities in undergraduate medical education, the discipline often suffers from a lack of clear definition in terms of scope, purpose and clinician engagement\(^1\), and as yet rarely attracts the degree of postgraduate and research activity generally associated with substantive academic disciplines. This confusion is reflected by high degree of variability in the range of topics included under the rubric – one Irish university includes global health as a part of Medical Humanities, possibly to the detriment of the definition of each discipline - and there is tentative investment at best by Irish universities in the infrastructure of such courses.

Without a clearer focus, the project risks marginalization, as outlined by the critique of the American poet Raphael Campo: “no conception of ‘the medical humanities’ compels, caught somewhere between manifesto, mushiness, and marketing lingo\(^2\). Advances in definition since then include a move beyond a mere list of relevant disciplines to consideration of issues such as how the medical humanities can act as a source of moral and aesthetic influence upon the daily praxis of organized clinical health care\(^3\), foster an understanding that medicine is a profoundly social enterprise and the practice of medicine a value-laden undertaking\(^4\), and provide an important personal support in the challenge of daily practice\(^5\). A helpful approach in understanding these aspects of medical training is Charon’s concept of the multiple dialogues inherent in the doctor-patient relationship\(^6\). That between the patient and the doctor, requiring empathic engagement, is obvious. Less apparent is that between the doctor and his peers – standards, audit, conscious and unconscious rationing – requiring the development of due professionalism. The third discourse is the doctor with him/her self – fears, prejudices, uncertainties, past experiences – mandating reflexive practice. Finally, there is the dialogue with society – stigma, rationing, ethics, support/lack of support – an awareness of which is critical to the development of trust.

All of these aspects fall generally within the emerging rubric of teaching professionalism, within which is nested clinical ethics and the medical humanities\(^7\). Within this framework the medical humanities provide not only content but also helpful educational tools. Much of the practice of medicine is complicated and rich in ambiguity. Metaphors are a good medium for explaining complexity, and artists often provide the best metaphors: examples include illuminating professional etiquette\(^8\), dignity in disabling illness\(^9\), the how to treat pain\(^10\), and the challenges of ageism in health care\(^11\). Irish medical schools can also benefit from newly evolving research and academic debate on the Medical Humanities\(^12\), including reflection on its content\(^13\), who determines the curricula\(^14\), who teaches this curricula and to what ends\(^15\). This body of knowledge can facilitate curriculum design which incorporates medical student critiques of existing programmes, including content (perceived relevance and consistency), teaching (credibility of teaching staff and perceived personal intrusiveness) and positioning with related topics within the curriculum.

Careful linking with physicians in practice is absolutely critical to ensure relevance and avoid a disconnect between what is taught and what is practiced, lest students and staff become cynical about the process. A helpful model has been developed in Ireland for the teaching of medical ethics which could serve as a template\(^16\), and physician leadership is likely to be vital in the development of curricula for both professionalism and the medical humanities. A major challenge to developing a Medical Humanities programme is the persisting perception of a dichotomy between the practice of medicine and the humanities\(^1\).

Although there are clearly strong elements of the basic sciences inherent in the practice of medicine, there is an increasing awareness that medical students and doctors are not an inarticulate group of aesthetic illiterates. A number of studies have shown that a high proportion of doctors are interested in the arts and humanities\(^17\) therefore the worst possible approach is to drop in dollops of high culture, rather than seeing them as collaborators in the educational process.

Our own approach has evolved from the perspective of an evolving combined Medical Humanities/Arts and Health programme with an active research, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching programme\(^18\). Critical success factors appear to include a clearly stated mission for academic outputs, engagement with peer-reviewed funding mechanisms, the pairing of interested clinicians and artists/humanities academics (a guard against dilettantism in both directions), delineation of theoretical frameworks, and an emphasis on basing the teaching on the arts, cultural and leisure activities of the students (rather than the faculty) to avoid the danger of losing touch with the personal relevance of the topic for the students.

This broader perspective on the humanities is important as much of the academic literature contains an over-emphasis on literature, poetry and the ‘high arts’: working with the students’ cultural and aesthetic preferences allows us to access film and television studies, popular music, photography and architecture to explore the medical humanities in a much more meaningful and personal way\(^19\). The development of medical humanities will also need investment of time and effort by those involved to ensure better integration between clinicians and academics in the humanities and arts practitioners: a successful programme requires true interdisciplinarity rather than vicarious multidisciplinarity. Unresolved issues include the organizational basis of the programme within the university, the engagement of full-time academic staff with part-time staff/adjunct lecturers, and a more consistent integration with other elements of the undergraduate curriculum.

Finally, due modesty about the outcomes of medical humanities programmes is also important. The development of professionalism is a life-course process, subtle in character but of huge importance to individual doctors and the profession. It is not surprising that enthusiasts would talk up the impact of medical humanities programmes, but as drily observed, literature’s relevance to coping with people in the Monday morning surgery queue is nil – unless they happen to be very old Russians\(^20\). The medical humanities do not make you a better person and they will not immediately improve your communication skills. However, we can be heartened in our pursuit of critically informed and relevant medical humanities programmes by emerging research that doctors who pursue cultural pursuits are more likely to display vocational engagement\(^21\), a key indicator of durable professionalism.

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Reporting Biochemical Toxicology to the Coroner Must be Improved

Biochemical toxicology for the coroner should encompass a wide ranging analytical screen for drugs and toxic compounds. A multidisciplinary case conference in appropriate complex cases must become the norm to furnish the coroner with expert advice where toxicology is a factor in the cause of death. A networked Institute of Forensic Services in Ireland should be formed to integrate toxicology, chemical pathology and histopathology in the provision of best quality scientific reports for coroners.

In the Coroner’s Act 1962 in Ireland, Section 33 sets the statutory arrangements for post-mortem and special examinations. For toxicology, “a coroner may request the minister to arrange – (b) a special examination by way of analysis, test or otherwise by a person appointed by the minister of particular parts or contents of the body or any other relevant substances or things,”. In the Coroner’s Act (Northern Ireland) 1959, Section 30 reads a “coroner who considers an analysis of any matter or thing of or concerning any dead body to be necessary may direct that such analysis be made by or under the supervision of a registered medical practitioner on the list mentioned in section twenty-six or by or under the supervision of the Director of the Northern Ireland Forensic Science Laboratory and it shall be the duty of such registered medical practitioner or Director (as the case may be) to submit a report of such analysis to the coroner.” In the Coroner’s Bill 2007 in Ireland, Part 10 concerns post-mortem and special examinations. Section 74, (3) states “Where a registered medical practitioner conducts a post-mortem examination or arranges for the conduct of a special examination...he or she shall do so under the direction of the coroner.”

The Review of the Coroner’s Service, Report of the Working Party, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 2000, identified the long delays in biochemical toxicology analysis time and in the processing of tissue samples from autopsies as impeding the coronial process. The maintenance of a Centre of Excellence to serve the coronial system was recommended but no such centre exists currently. The problem with the State Laboratory service is its isolation from clinical practice and its role in proving services to many sectors including agriculture. University College Dublin houses the Medical Bureau of Road Safety which also provides analytical services in drug toxicology in relation to driving under the influence of intoxicants. Other than turn-around times for reports, nowhere in the Report are the substantive issues of delineating minimum standards of service provision, in the scale and breadth of toxicological screening, clinical governance involving toxicologists, chemical pathologists and biochemists and analytical best practice, mentioned for services in the Republic.

The Report of the Working Party recommended the establishment of a committee to devise coroners’ rules. The Rules Committee Report is inadequate in the biochemical toxicology sphere. Toxicology requires interpretative expertise with knowledge of toxicity, pharmacology and internal medicine. Factors which influence the biochemical result include the anatomical site of blood or other matrix sampling, the body storage temperature, the interval since death and movements and position of the body. There is in addition post-mortem redistribution of drugs and ante-mortem drug metabolism which must be considered to minimise interpretative errors. Utilisation of appropriate expertise should be included in any set of coroners’ rules to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. The degree of diversity of biochemical screening for toxins should be agreed nationally and remain constantly under review in response to local, national and international developments in substance abuse.

A multidisciplinary conference involving toxicology input in relevant cases should be a standard best-practice procedure to advise on the interpretation of the post-mortem findings in complex cases prior to the autopsy pathologist reporting the conclusions to the coroner. Meetings could be arranged both by video conference call and in person. Standard templates for reporting common analyses should be agreed to limit the number of case conferences. This is an important safeguard for the scientific integrity of the coronial process. Because the lawyer coroner is not in a position to specify the extent of analytical screening, the role of the toxicology interpretative and analytical service must be explicitly recognised. The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 in England and Wales specifies that there are training requirements for Medical Examiners in their new system both before and during their period in office. The Medical Council in