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Feature Editor

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.

Movies and Medicine: An Elective Using Film to Reflect on the Patient, Family, and Illness

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Students are often interested in new and creative ways of looking at medical issues. Film is a medium that not only ignites enthusiasm for learning but also adjusts the lens by which that learning takes place.¹ In family medicine, we are aware that medical illness seldom affects only the individual; the patient's family is always involved at some level. We have combined this theme of how the family (broadly defined) adapts to illness with the study of film to create a medical school elective. We use film to highlight themes and to promote discussion and reflection. In this article, we describe our elective, report on student evaluations of the elective, discuss how you can create your own similar elective,

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and comment about broader issues of teaching with film.

Elective Goals and Objectives

During the elective, we aim to have students gain an appreciation of the many issues that face a patient and his/her family when an illness is present. This is achieved through viewing and discussing various carefully chosen films. As a result of this elective, students are better able to (1) view films with a guided approach to derive an understanding of how illness affects not only the patient but the entire family, (2) participate in discussions about a series of medical issues related to how illness affects the family, including substance abuse, caregiver burnout, death and dying, etc, (3) reflect in a weekly journal on the films they have seen and their own experiences with patients and their families, (4) reflect on a film of their own choosing that deals with a medical-related issue and how it affects the family through a written

paper and a 15-minute presentation to the group.

Elective Content

In the face of medical illness, families rise to the occasion or become more disconnected, help one another or turn on one another and cast blame, and find new sources of support or strengthen the ones that exist. During the elective, we address five themes within the subject of how families deal with the illness of a loved one. The themes include:

(1) The Family and Illness

We introduce the students to viewing film with an eye for reflecting on larger concepts. We look specifically at how family members find a will to help their loved ones even in the midst of a lack of resources or medical futility.

Films: Year 1: "Lorenzo's Oil" and "The Straight Story" (Year 2: "A River Runs Through It" in place of "The Straight Story") (Some

films were changed in the second year of teaching the course in response to student feedback.)

(2) *The Family and Loss*

We examine how families can become dysfunctional in the presence of the loss of a loved one and what it takes to heal. We also reflect on the idea of prevention and trying to deal with crisis before it occurs.

Films: Year 1: "Ordinary People" and "Barbarian Invasions" (Year 2: "The Trip to Bountiful" in place of "Barbarian Invasions")

(3) *The Family and Caregiving*

The strain of illness on family members who provide direct care to ill patients is a topic that is often ignored. In this segment, we try to understand how some prevail and others become overwhelmed in this role.

Films: "Marvin's Room" and "Iris"

(4) *The Family and Substance Abuse*

We use substance abuse as one example of how family members get caught in roles that are difficult to break out of.

Films: "When a Man Loves a Woman" and "The Days of Wine and Roses"

(5) *Extended Family and Illness*

Illness has a way of bringing people together in extraordinary ways. The idea of family is often extended to other support people who are friends, community members, or even unlikely acquaintances. It is important for the physician to learn to nurture these important support systems.

Films: Year 1: "Flawless" and "My House in Umbria" (Year 2: "Beaches" and "Barbarian Invasions")

Elective Participants

This course is designed for students who have an interest in film and want to explore themes about

how patients and their families are affected and changed by illness. In our school, we extend the offer to first- and second-year medical students. It is a 4-credit course (students are required to complete 12 elective credits prior to the start of third year). We allow between five and 10 students to take the elective.

Student expectations include five 2-hour discussion sessions held every other week and one additional, longer session for student presentations. Students are expected to spend 4 hours of preparation time per week. Each week the group has a discussion of the two films (students view films on their own time, not in class) and write brief answers to questions provided by faculty to aid as discussion starters.

Students are encouraged to reflect on what the various themes mean for patients and their families. Students offer examples from their own clinical experiences in Student Continuity Practice (half day per week for first 3 years of medical school) or other settings where they have dealt with similar issues.

Elective Expectations

Students must do the following: (1) Participate in each discussion session, (2) Write a final paper: five pages on a film of the student's choosing on any theme related to the patient, family, and illness, (3) Do a 15-minute presentation on the film discussed in the final paper, and (4) Write a weekly journal entry on each film viewed (which can be the answer to the provided questions mentioned above).

Elective Evaluation

Students evaluate the elective subjectively through an anonymous survey. They have had many positive comments about the preceptors and the elective. The following are examples:

I realize that illness has a bigger impact on the family than I previously thought and that in

order to treat the patient well, you have to see how the family is structured.

These movies and discussions helped drive home the fact that patients' entire lives are often altered by illness and that what we may see in the office or clinic is just the tip of the iceberg.

I think the take-home message is that every family deals with illness in a different, yet important way. As physicians, it will be our duty to ascertain what type of family support our patients have to better understand their approach to the illness.

I feel it [the film elective] was a great way to introduce the full scope of an illness. Medical school focuses on recognition and understanding of an illness and its impact on the patient, so it was refreshing to redirect my thinking to include the impact on those surrounding the patient as well. A patient's health can depend on those surrounding him/her so it would behoove me to consider them as well.

I think I've become more aware of the different ways in which families deal with illness. There is a lot of diversity in this respect, and it was valuable for me to be in a group situation and to hear others' perspective on this subject. In caring for patients, it is so easy to assume that the definition of what makes a family is similar for all people. It is also easy to think that all patients may confront illness and death and dying in the same way. Through a variety of films and the group discussion, this class helped me to learn different ways in which people and families cope with the emotional and physical burden of illness. It also helped me to appreciate the way in which movies can be a useful educational tool.

Lessons Learned

Film is a medium that has been used on its own as an elective or interspersed in other courses as a reference. Instructors will use short clips or entire movies. In our setting, we found that having students watch the entire movie was part of the learning process. They came to know the film characters as complex people rather than just teaching props, much like a home visit versus an office visit. In this way, we also found that students relate to the characters in the films as if they were real patients, attempting to think about how they (as future doctors) might better understand issues that occur outside the office for a family. The students were given a rare opportunity to get to watch what happens to a family when one member is affected by illness. While students reflected that they get glimpses of this with actual patients in their clinical ex-

perience, the films allowed them to see that there might be a lot more going on in the patient's life and within the family unit than had first been considered. It also allowed the students to witness a diversity of complicated family scenarios that they may not encounter for many years in real life. The course offered them insight into dealing with these future situations.

Our small-group discussions were powerful for deepening the newfound understanding about family and illness by students. We often replayed a clip to be sure we all came away with the strong message or someone else's point of view. However, the journals and presentations were equally powerful mediums for expression for those who were quieter in the group but had profound observations to make.

Finally, while this was a big time commitment for faculty (watching

films; grading journals, papers, and final presentations; group discussions; creating weekly questions), it was a fun course to teach. The pleasure was derived from bonding with students in informal discussions, watching entertaining and effective cinema, and observing students making the connection that family plays on an individual's health.

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