



Perspective

How Medical Humanities Can Help Save Lives – Including Ours

by Art Derse, MD, JD

The Wall Street Journal recently featured a [story](#) that asked the question, “What would Aristotle do in a pandemic?” It’s not such an odd question. Philosophy is part of the humanities, academic disciplines that ask important questions about our human lives. Ancient writers may have wisdom to share with modern day physicians who have to face the challenges of COVID-19.

For Aristotle, character was paramount. Character is demonstrated through traits that included courage and perseverance in the face of adversity. Courage is a laudable character trait, though Aristotle also recognized that courage had to be appropriate to the situation. The character trait of prudence helps recognize when courage is appropriate to the situation that lies between cowardice and foolhardiness. Those teachings from millennia ago can guide us in today’s pandemic crisis.

Physicians and trainees are being called to take risks in their roles as professionals. The risks are greater than usual and must be weighed in relationship to duties these individuals have to themselves, their families and their other patients. A firefighter’s job is to run into burning buildings. But the firefighter needs protective equipment in order to fight the fire.

If a patient with COVID-19 suffers a cardiopulmonary arrest, physicians and nurses may wish to rush immediately into the room to begin CPR (if it might be beneficial to the patient in the circumstances), but caring for patients while protecting ourselves from the virus (that has already [killed](#) almost a thousand health care personnel in the US) and preventing transmission of the virus to

other patients or our family calls for donning adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), even if it takes precious time to do so.

Balancing appropriate courage and exercising prudence in caring for patients requires another character trait known as “practical wisdom.” Aristotle taught that practical wisdom was both necessary and sufficient for being virtuous. As you demonstrate your courage in striving to save the lives of others, knowing a little about Aristotle might help save your life and, in turn, those of your other patients and your loved ones.

Philosophy is not the only area of medical humanities that can provide help and comfort at this time. Literature can give us important, life-supporting and perhaps life-saving insights. Albert Camus, in *The Plague*, and Steward O’Nan, in *A Prayer for the Dying*, described the moral challenges facing physicians working in epidemics.

Rafael Campo, MD, physician and poet who worked during the plague-like early years of HIV/AIDS, [gives](#) us the comfort of his own poetry and shares with us his favorite poets – including physician-poet William Carlos Williams and hospital attendant Walt Whitman – to show that healers can get through this. Physician-writers can be role models that help us to be more empathetic and compassionate to our patients and may also soothe our understandable anxieties during this pandemic.

Emergency physician and essayist Jay Baruch, MD sends us [missives](#) from the frontline where he rails against the broken system that forces him to re-use single-use PPE while treating patients that put everyone at increased risk. The team members trust each another to keep themselves and their patients as safe as they can. His essay highlights the character strengths of teamwork and courage while acknowledging and advocating for the safety of the team. This pandemic challenges us to care for our patients while being responsible for the safety of each other.

The humanities can be expressed in many ways in medicine. Colleen Farrell, MD, is an example of a physician who balances her professional responsibilities

with humanism and love of medical humanities. She is an internist who recently began a critical care fellowship in July. She treats patients valiantly in the ICU even as she advocates for the protective equipment that residents need to care for patients. She [shares](#) her grief and her tears with friends when she loses patients to the pandemic. She played the violin (while appropriately masked) at a memorial service for a nurse felled while treating patients by COVID-19, and plays when she can for her own self-care. She also hosts a biweekly Twitter discussion on medical humanities.

Medical humanities help us develop equanimity – the character trait William Osler said was most important to physicians – by maintaining balance and judgment in chaotic and unpredictable circumstances. We exercise practical wisdom by acting on the knowledge of when to do the right thing at the right time in the right manner for the patients to whose good we are dedicated.

A recent [profile](#) considered whether the extensive grounding in the humanities, including philosophy, that Dr. Anthony Fauci pursued in his education has shaped the physician, scientist and leader that he is today. Dr. Fauci is an exemplar for humanities in medicine, helping us face the COVID-19 challenge with equanimity as he does now, and did when our nation first faced HIV/AIDS.

Medical humanities can indeed help in clarity, insight and comfort during this challenging time. And might just save lives, including ours.

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