

Course Director

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Health Sciences Digital Library and Learning Center

Rationale

How does literary language depict the experience of physical suffering? Can a poem or a novel palliate pain, illness, even the possibility of death? From darkly comic narratives of black plague and accounts of early modern melancholy to twentieth century critiques of the mental institution and depictions of the AIDS crisis, this course examines literature centered on medical practices from the early modern period through the twentieth century. Why have medical practices changed, and how do writers address their political, social, and ideological implications? Readings will include a broad range of genres, including poetry (Coleridge, Whitman), fiction (McEwan, Chekhov, Gilman, Kafka), theater (Kushner), nonfiction prose (Defoe, Woolf), and critical theory (Scarry, Canguilhem, Sontag).

This six-part course examines the potential for literature to bridge the gap between the empirical and humanistic approaches to medicine to heighten our sensitivity to personal issues of disease, pain and suffering, and, ultimately, death.

Course Objectives

1. Develop awareness and understanding of the presentation of medical issues in literature (and film).
2. Develop critical skills in analyzing insights literature provides into the medical profession, particularly from the patient's perspective.
3. Develop an understanding of "story-telling" as an essential theme of illness and the literature of illness.
4. Develop skills of "story-telling" in conveying medical information.

In addition, this elective will help foster the following competencies among medical students as established by the AAMC in its 1998 Medical School Objectives Project:

1. [Development of] honesty and integrity in all interactions with patients' families, colleagues, and others with whom physicians must interact in their professional lives;
2. The capacity to recognize and accept limitations in one's knowledge and clinical skills, and a commitment to continuously improve one's knowledge and ability;

3. The ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, with patients, patients' families, colleagues, and others with whom physicians must exchange information in carrying out their responsibilities;
4. Knowledge of important non-biological determinants of poor health and of the economic, psychological, social, and cultural factors that contribute to the development and/or continuation of maladies.

Format

- ☐ Small group discussion
- ☐ Six two-hour sessions (Tuesdays, 2-4 PM)
- ☐ Minimum class size will be 5 students, and the class will be capped at 15 students.
- ☐ Class location: E3.314E

Student Evaluation

Grades will be pass / fail. Attendance is required to receive credit for the course.

Course Evaluation

Grading will be pass/fail. To receive transcript acknowledgment, students must:

- attend 5 of 6 sessions
- complete the online course evaluation form