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VIEW POINT

Can Medical Humanities take root in Asia?

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ABSTRACT

Medical humanities are a diverse group of disciplines. Literature, arts, music, drama, films, bioethics, medical anthropology, philosophy of medicine, history of medicine and medical sociology has been included in the group of medical humanities.

Asia is a huge continent and has the largest number of medical schools in the world. Recently, many new medical schools have been opened, predominantly in the private sector. English is the language of instruction in many medical schools.

Medical Humanities, as a discipline, is most developed in the United States of America. Strong programs also exist in the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Norway and Sweden. In Asia, the University of Tel Aviv in Israel conducts a course in "The philosophy of medicine".

In the west, there has been strong support for Medical Humanities at an administrative level. A variety of methods are used to teach the subject, and learning is fun and is interesting. A number of journals publish articles related to Medical Humanities. Online journals and blogs make publishing easy, and online databases serve as a repository of material.

In Asia, the traditional hierarchical structure of the student-teacher relationship may be a problem towards widespread adoption of interactive, small-group learning. This is however, changing. English being the language of instruction, and lack of division of the medical curriculum into core areas and electives, may also be a problem. Interdisciplinary learning is not well developed. Voluntary modules offered to interested students can create a case for introduction of the humanities in the curriculum. The humanities will be helpful towards creating more 'humane' doctors.

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What are the Medical Humanities?

The humanities are a diverse group of disciplines, and includes the theory of literature and art, history (including the history of ideas and the arts), theology and philosophy at the core.[1] Cultural studies, religious studies, postcolonial studies, feminist studies, cultural anthropology and social psychology can also be included.[1]

An agreed definition of what constitutes Medical Humanities is lacking.[2] Important differences exist in what is understood by MH, between institutions and countries.[2] The centre for Medical Humanities in London, England, defines MH as an interdisciplinary and increasingly international endeavour, that draws on the creative and intellectual strengths of diverse disciplines, including literature, art, creative writing, drama, film, music, philosophy, ethical decision making, anthropology and history in pursuit of medical educational goals.[2]

Literature, arts, music, drama and films have been included in Medical Humanities (MH) programmes in various medical schools. Bioethics, medical anthropology, philosophy of medicine, history of medicine and medical sociology has also been included. The Medical

Humanities (MH) can be seen as the Humanities applied in a medical context.

Justification for teaching the Medical Humanities to medical students:

Humanities aim to protect, nurture, and respect the innate humanity, dynamic imagination, and precious individuality of medical students. [3] MH can help students to become ethical, empathic and educated physicians.[3]

MH can play an instrumental role in the education of future doctors.[4] Literature can introduce students to unfamiliar and problematic life situations.[5] Drama can teach oral communication, and philosophy can teach the skill of analyses and argument.[5] Literature can be a source of case histories for medical students. The study of the history of medicine can underline the transient nature of much of the medical knowledge and emphasize the importance of keeping up to date.[5]

In Asia, most medical students enter medical school after a school education which focuses more on science and technical aspects. School education in the subjects of Physics, Chemistry and Biology, are a requirement for admission in most countries.

The Asian continent:

At the risk of sounding pedantic, let me state that Asia is a huge region extending from Siberia in the north, to the islands of Indonesia in the south, and from Turkey and Israel in the west, to Japan in the east. The continent has the largest percentage of the world's population and the largest number of medical schools.

In South Asia, in recent years, a number of new medical schools have been opened.[6], [7] Many of the schools/colleges are in the private sector. Medical schools in China have started undergraduate medical courses in the English language, aimed predominantly at South Asian students.[8]

Medical Humanities around the world:

United States of America was the pioneer in starting MH programmes in the modern sense. The Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine had started the 'Human values in medicine' program more than 30 years ago.[9] At present, at Ohio, students are required to contribute 120 hours to Medical Humanities. The University of California, Irvine, College of Medicine, started a program in Medical

Humanities and Arts in 1997.[10] The program aimed to enhance aspects of professionalism like empathy, altruism, compassion, caring towards patients, and to hone communication and observational skills among the students.[10] The University of Rochester, New York, follows a double helix curriculum with close intertwining of the basic and the clinical sciences.[11] The University has developed a MH concentration for the students.

In Europe, the University of Geneva in Switzerland runs an MH course which is composed of four compulsory seminars of two hours duration, and a one month optional course.[12] The University of Oslo, Norway[13] and the Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden[14] also run programs in the Medical Humanities. The National University of La Plata, Argentina has been running a MH program since 1976. [15] These are just a selection of MH programs, which in these days, are common in most Western medical schools.

In Asia, the University of Tel Aviv School of Medicine, conducts an introductory course in the Philosophy of Medicine.[16] The course comprises formal lectures, questions and answer sessions and exercises. The Melaka Manipal College of Medicine in Malaysia, teaches students to use patient narratives during the clinical years of training.[17] A voluntary MH module has been conducted at the Manipal College of Medical Sciences, Pokhara, Nepal.[18] Traditional bioethics courses in a lecture format, are carried out in many medical schools. The author has not been able to locate information on MH programs in other Asian medical schools.

Possible factors behind the success of the Medical Humanities programs in the developed West:

There has been strong support for MH courses at the administrative level. In the United Kingdom (UK), "Tomorrow's doctors" published by the General Medical Council, proposed the introduction of a core syllabus, and suggested that as much as 30% of the timetable be allocated to Special Study Modules.[19] The council cited the appropriateness of courses such as 'literature and medicine' for undergraduate students. At the Stony Brook University School of Medicine in the United States, teaching on humanities was started by Edmund Pellegrino, the first dean of the medical school, and the program has received considerable support from succeeding deans.[20]

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), had in 1984, published an extensive report titled 'Physicians for the twenty-first century', which had enumerated an increasing role for the MH.[21]

The programs use interactive, small group learning methods, and a variety of activities to promote student learning. The program at California uses creative projects to allow students to reflect on patients and themselves.[10] Photographic exhibits, reader's theater, plays, dance and musical performances are also used. At Dalhousie, Canada, a reading weekend in an inn or resort in the countryside is organized during autumn.[22] The Dalhousie Society for the History of Medicine has a monthly dinner meeting where papers are presented. The University has a Tupper band which performs frequently locally, and also tours the US and Canada.[22]

A variety of methods are used for the learning of MH. The students get an opportunity to present their projects and literary and artistic output. Learning is made 'fun' and is interesting.

The journal 'Academic Medicine' (www.academicmedicine.org) publishes a monthly feature called Medicine and the Arts. The journal also publishes special theme issues on the medical humanities. The BMJ publishing group has started a journal titled Medical Humanities (www.medicalhumanities.com). In addition, there are a number of journals and magazines devoted to the Medical Humanities, like Cell2Soul (www.cell2soul.org) and Synapse. Many of these journals also have blogs which makes online publishing easy, cheap and quick.

The internet has played a major role in promoting and popularizing Medical Humanities. The New York University (NYU) had started a multidisciplinary database called the Literature, Arts and Medicine database.[23] This database contains annotated links to paintings, literature, films and drama. In the United Kingdom, the Centre for Medical Humanities at the University College London (UCL), launched the Medical Humanities Resource database.[24]

The UK has started an intercalated Bachelor of Science degree in the Medical Humanities.[2] There is a wide range of support from humanities programs in arts colleges, funding agencies, foundations and trusts. In the US and UK, conferences and seminars are organized, leading

to exchange of ideas and strengthening of relationships among MH educators.

Challenges for Medical Humanities education in Asia:

Medical Humanities generally use interactive, small group, activity based learning. There is often a blurring of lines between the teacher and the taught. This may be important, as MH requires the active, creative participation of the students, and the creation of a safe and non-threatening learning environment. The student-teacher relationship is egalitarian. According to Eng KH of the National University of Singapore, Asian cultures have a stiff and formal student-teacher relationship, with the teacher being seen as a distant figure, and a figure of authority.[25] However, another author had commented that Asian students have a strong inclination to belong to groups working towards a common goal, and adapt relatively quickly to new learning environments.[26]

PBL is becoming increasingly common in Asian medical schools. In Southeast Asia, medical schools are adopting educational innovations and realigning curricula.[27] A survey had shown that 50% of responding schools had PBL in their curricula.[27]

There has been little progress in Medical Humanities education in Asia, except, may be in Israel. At present, associations or organizations for the promotion of the MH are lacking in Asia. Asian medical journals do not devote space to the humanities and literature. Another possible problem could be language. Many medical schools in Asia use English as the medium of instruction. However, a lot of Asian literature has been written in local languages. These can be translated into English, but may lose something in the translation. Local languages can be used, but many schools have students who speak a variety of languages. These days, schools increasingly have an international student body.

Also, linkages between medical schools and liberal arts colleges are not strong in most of Asia. Interdisciplinary learning and teaching in medical schools is also not well developed. Support at the level of administrators and curriculum committees have also not been forthcoming, unlike in the west.

The Asian medical curriculum in many countries, has not divided medical knowledge into a core curriculum and electives, or special study modules, which the student may opt for, depending on his/her aptitude and interest.

Medical humanities learning have not been stressed in the curriculum.

Voluntary modules on MH may be one approach which can be adopted. The module can be offered to interested students, and later, a case can be made for inclusion of MH in the curriculum. Asia is a big continent, and is a diverse place, but shares certain common values. Respect for authority, respect towards the elders, strong family values, and the hierarchical nature of groups, are some of these. Medical Humanities can be of tremendous help towards creating more 'humane' doctors for Asia.

Conclusion:

Medical Humanities is an interdisciplinary area. Medicine and the Arts, Philosophy of Medicine, Medical Anthropology, Medical Sociology and Bioethics, are among the various disciplines constituting the Medical Humanities. Asia is a huge continent and has diversity of cultures, but with certain shared values. A number of medical schools have been opened in Asia. Medical Humanities first took root in the United States. Strong programs also exist in the UK, Europe, Israel and Argentina. Administrative support, financial and technical backing, and sharing of resources are among the many factors which led to the success of programs in the west. Many hurdles exist towards starting MH programs in Asia, but these can be overcome. A voluntary module might be a good approach to initiate MH learning.

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