

Humanities and Medicine: An Exercise in Emphasizing Empathy

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Abstract

Background: Empathy is a trait of medical professionals that is emphasized throughout stages of medical training. Students are often expected to develop empathy, resilience, and a stable professional identity in environments that challenge all three. Throughout my life, reflective journaling has been a constant practice: a way to understand my experiences, process challenges, and stay grounded to my values. Entering medical school, I continued journaling as an intentional humanities-based exercise to examine whether long-term, self-directed reflective writing could help preserve empathy and mindfulness during the earliest stages of my training.

Methods: This mentored scholarly project used a qualitative autoethnographic approach to analyze personal journals written across preclinical, clinical, and post-clinical phases of medical school. Entries were reviewed for recurring themes related to empathy, identity formation, stress and resilience, and the ultimate integration of personal and professional growth. Literature on narrative medicine, reflective writing, and the role of humanities in medical education informed the analytic framework.

Results: Several themes emerged across four years of training. Journaling created space to maintain empathy when faced with emotional challenges in personal situations or high-pressure clinical experiences. It was a consistent outlet for navigating burnout, uncertainty, and the tension between personal life events and professional responsibilities. Reflection also supported the gradual development of a professional identity grounded in humanism, cultural humility, and self-awareness. Finally, journaling offered a way to reconcile the challenges and responsibilities of becoming a physician with the values I brought into medicine.

Conclusion: Longitudinal reflective journaling served as more than a simple record of experiences; it became a tool for sustaining empathy, processing stress, and building the foundation for a stable professional identity. This project highlights the value of humanities-based practices within medical education, suggesting that self-directed, sustained reflection may help students preserve their sense of meaning and humanity throughout training.