Abstract:

Despite increasing interest in incorporating Medical Humanities in undergraduate medical education, the discipline often suffers from a lack of clear definition in terms of scope, purpose and clinician engagement, and as yet rarely attracts the degree of postgraduate and research activity generally associated with substantive academic disciplines. This confusion is reflected by high degree of variability in the range of topics included under the rubric ‘Medical Humanities’. Irish universities include global health as a part of Medical Humanities, possibly to the detriment of the definition of each discipline - and there is tentative investment at best by Irish universities in the infrastructure of such courses. Without a clearer focus, the project risks marginalization, as outlined by the critique of the American poet Raphael Campo: “no conception of the medical humanities compels, caught somewhere between manifesto, mushiness, and marketing lingo”.

Our own approach has evolved from the perspective of an evolving combined Medical Humanities/Arts and Health programme with an active part-time staff/adjunct lecturers, and a more consistent integration with other elements of the undergraduate curriculum. Unresolved issues include the organizational basis of the programme within the university, the engagement of full-time academic staff with the programme, and the consistent integration with other elements of the undergraduate curriculum.

Our approach is to drop in dollops of high culture, rather than seeing them as collaborators in the educational process. Critical success factors appear to include a clearly stated mission for academic outputs, engagement with peer-reviewed funding mechanisms, the pairing of interested clinicians and artists/humanities academics (a guard against the dichotomy in both directions), delineation of theoretical frameworks, and an emphasis on basing the teaching on the arts, cultural and leisure activities of the students (rather than the faculty) to avoid the danger of losing touch with the personal relevance of the topic for the students.

This broader perspective on the humanities is important as much of the academic literature contains an over-emphasis on literature, poetry and the high arts; working with the students' cultural and aesthetic preferences allows us to access film and television studies, popular music and the ‘high arts’: working with the students' cultural and aesthetic preferences allows us to access film and television studies, popular music and the ‘high arts’.

21. O'Neill D. The Iris Prize 2010 15 May

References

H Moss, D O'Neill
National Centre for Arts and Health, Tallaght Hospital, Dublin 24
Email: agnomin@tcd.ie

Medical Humanities Serious Academic Pursuit or Doorway to Dilettantism?