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Healing Arts: Narrative Medicine & Pain Care

There is no objective measurement for pain. No thermometer, blood test, visual or manual assessment will tell you how much someone hurts. Pain is a lived experience revealed only through the stories of the one living it. Neuroscience shows that pain is highly influenced by stories too: personal experiences, beliefs, and expectations (the stories we tell ourselves) are just as relevant to recovery as diagnosis and prognosis (the stories our doctors tell us). And yet, most clinical education fails to prepare healthcare professionals to interact with stories in a meaningful way.

Narrative Medicine, a new field of study emerging from Columbia Medical school, addresses the need for narrative competence with a practice. Through close reading, the signature method of Narrative Medicine, healthcare professionals learn how to listen attentively and generously to patient stories. Reflective writing exercises also help practitioners examine their own narratives in supportive group settings. By bridging healthcare and the humanities, Narrative Medicine hopes to reform healthcare systems that so often miss the story behind the symptom and the human behind the patient. In this interactive presentation, I will introduce participants to the fundamental concepts and techniques of Narrative Medicine. Then, I will discuss how I have applied Narrative Medicine to pain care, both in my private clinical practice and in an online education program where I teach Narrative Medicine methods to pain care professionals. Finally, I will lead a live Narrative Medicine workshop where participants will practice close reading and attentive listening via Elizabeth Bishop's villanelle "One Art." After discussing the poem together, we will collaborate in a short writing and storytelling roundtable that encourages participants to slow down, sink in, and think-with each other's stories. As workshop participants will experience first-hand, Narrative Medicine offers a safe space for all those who seek and deliver healthcare to connect and process their experiences through the lens of creative expression. By building stronger patient-provider relationships, we will build more productive, more sustainable, and more ethical healthcare communities.