

Liberal Education for Family Practice

As an editor, I have the opportunity to read many manuscripts that are never published. One of the striking features of these manuscripts is the failure of the authors to articulate their ideas clearly. This seems particularly evident when the content of the manuscript is not strictly scientific in nature, but it also applies to some manuscripts that are scientific.

Many of the problems in the manuscripts relate to rather basic grammatical errors, which lead to ambiguous statements. Other errors include inappropriate word usage, misspelling, poor syntax, and poor organization of thoughts.

Many of us have experienced the problems that arise when we try to interpret the recording of a patient's progress in hospital and office records. Often the same kinds of writing errors occur and may lead to misinterpretation of a patient's record. I have wondered why so many physicians (including myself) seem to have difficulty expressing ideas in written communication. Some of my academic colleagues complain that students and residents are barely literate. My observations have been that some senior faculty and practitioners show this same tendency.

While it is tempting to blame the educational "system" for these shortcomings, it is sometimes more difficult to identify the specific causes for our students' and trainees' apparent inability to excel at written communication. They all seem to come to medical school with sufficient basic intelligence and do not lack innate abilities to reason. Most of them also have creative ideas and sufficient energy. If we can accept these observations as being realistic assessments, why do so many of us have difficulty expressing ideas clearly and effectively?

A recent discussion with a medical school candidate has helped me to appreciate at least one of the inherent problems in the process of preparation for professional training. The premise that was being explored was that physicians require a sound background in liberal arts to be able to practice their profession effectively. The student agreed with this premise and further indicated that her baccalaureate premedical advisor strongly

supported that concept. However, the student felt that in order to maintain an acceptable grade point average (GPA), she must concentrate her efforts in the science courses and be very selective about other courses. The fear was that she would be required to compete for good grades with other students whose major courses of study were in those "nonscience" fields. This situation was interpreted as a threat to the all-important GPA.

This problem is further aggravated by the fact that many colleges assign the responsibility for basic courses to junior faculty and teaching assistants. The student who wants to obtain a broad base in liberal arts is thus rarely exposed to the more mature and stimulating senior faculty. This exposure now generally occurs only in the more advanced courses where it is more difficult to achieve a higher grade point average. Perhaps, this is one way in which the "system" tends to discourage the achievement of a sound liberal education.

Family practice is a specialty in which the practitioner has both the need and the opportunity to use a liberal education. Arts, humanities, and science are all coalesced to bear on problems of the human condition. Integration of a wide variety of knowledge and skills is the very essence of family practice in contrast to more reductionistic theory and practice often exhibited in other specialties. Therefore, it seems that students with a broad liberal arts background would find family practice more attractive.

Armed with a solid base in liberal arts, students pursuing a professional career are "liberated" to gain greater satisfaction and more benefit from their professional training. In addition, they are likely to be better able to communicate effectively with a wide variety of audiences. It is my firm belief that our profession and our patients would benefit from more fully educated physicians having a firm background in liberal arts in addition to having a solid basis in scientific facts and methods. We should try to influence educators to remove systematic barriers to the achievement of these goals.

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