

Humanities mini-courses for doctors sharpen thinking and creativity

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Mini-courses designed to increase creative stimulation and variety in physicians' daily routines can sharpen critical thinking skills, improve job satisfaction and encourage innovative thinking, according to Penn State College of Medicine researchers who piloted a series of such courses.

"For decades, career development theory has identified a stage that occurs at midlife, characterized by a desire to escape the status quo and pursue new ventures," said Kimberly Myers, Ph.D., associate professor of humanities. "It is increasingly clear that these mid-career professionals are yearning to explore ways of thinking that are outside of their usual responsibilities."

The courses are an outgrowth of a pilot initiative called the Penn State Hershey Physician Writers Group, which Myers founded and facilitated. The group met every other week for three months and explored how medically related topics are featured in different literary genres. Participants wrote original pieces, which they discussed and edited with each other and Myers.

"The process of literary analysis, which is both methodical and intuitive, helps to sharpen the cognitive processes inherent in [medical diagnosis](#) and treatment that are so vital in medical practice," said Myers. "Group discussions also provide a refreshing opportunity for collaboration, which help to form new alliances among colleagues."

Many physicians' writings were published in professional journals, and the physicians reported overwhelming satisfaction with the experience. As a result of the [pilot program](#)'s success, the researchers and their colleagues in the Department of Humanities developed and conducted eight mini-courses on different topics throughout 2010-2011.

Results of this project appear in [Academic Medicine](#).

Although each course had its own objectives, the overarching goal of the series was to provide humanities-related, clinically relevant learning opportunities for health care practitioners.

"The topics covered fell into four general categories: reading, reflection, and discussion; creative expression; technology; and ethics," said Daniel George, Ph.D., assistant professor of humanities.

To accommodate busy schedules, the researchers scheduled these courses across an eight-month period and met three to five times total. Each hour of participation earned one Continuing Medical Education credit. Participants included physicians, nurses, administrative and support staff, medical and nursing students and health researchers and scientists.

Post-course surveys proved as favorable as the feedback from the Writers Group. Participants reported a high degree of satisfaction with learning new disciplines outside of biomedicine, using their training in uncustomary ways, forming new camaraderie with their colleagues, and enjoying a respite from the stressful flow of the workday.

"These courses offer an opportunity for intellectual and social 'play' to those who participate, which fosters workplace satisfaction and creative, innovative thinking," said George. "Efforts that implement programs like these in other medical settings could potentially contribute to reviving

the health care system, which would ultimately benefit both practitioners and their patients."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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