

Studying Shakespeare could help medical students connect with patients

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A palliative care doctor has suggested that studying Shakespeare's plays could help medical students connect more closely with their patients. Writing in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* Dr. David Jeffrey, of the Department of Palliative Medicine at the University of Edinburgh, investigates how the playwright's empathic approach—the ability to understand and share the feelings of another—can enhance the patient-doctor relationship.

Dr. Jeffrey writes that the idea that emotions are disruptive and need to be controlled is deeply ingrained in medical education and practice, contributing to doctors distancing from patients. The coronavirus pandemic, with the need for personal protections, [social distancing](#) and video consultations has, he says, created challenges to establishing [empathic](#) relationships between patients and doctors.

He argues that a study of Shakespeare's plays may be a creative way of enhancing empathic approaches in [medical students](#). Drawing on references from *The Tempest*, *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, he writes: "It is remarkable that Shakespeare's work remains relevant today. It seems that he had an ability to anticipate our thoughts, particularly in times of crisis."

Dr. Jeffrey describes the way Shakespeare depicts the world from the other person's point of view, not just their understanding, but their emotions and their moral perspectives. This approach, he writes, creates a space for interpretation and reflection, to experience empathy. "Creating such a space for reflection is a central part of clinical practice and medical education."

He adds: "Shakespeare speaks through times of crisis, underlining the centrality of empathic human relationships. Medical humanities are often on the fringes of [medical education](#) but should be central to medicine culture change. A special study module would be one way of introducing Shakespeare studies to the undergraduate curriculum."

More information: David Ian Jeffrey, Shakespeare's empathy: enhancing connection in the patient–doctor relationship in times of crisis, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/0141076821996005](#)

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