

Healing and Humanities

Teaching Empathy in the Medical Classroom



Keira Amstutz

Dr. Emily Beckman recently met with a group of medical students to discuss Albert Camus' *The Plague*.

During their conversation, one of the M.D./Ph.D. students in the circle likened the medical school experience to being a gladiator in the Roman Colosseum, dueling against his fellow students in brutal competition for the top.

It seems we've created this sort of environment in medicine. Students engage in cutthroat competition with their classmates to get the best grades, the highest MCAT scores and the most lab hours, and that's a little alarming when we consider that many of these individuals will care for us when we are at our sickest and most vulnerable state.

By understanding this problem, Beckman believes the medical humanities can begin to provide a solution. Sure, the need to focus on biomedicine is supremely important for our caretakers, but the human dimension of health care is equally important.

Beckman is passionate about bridging these gaps

diverse group of faculty more than 20 years ago.

Courses in the program range from *The Culture of Mental Illness* and *The Literature of Addiction to Ethics and Policy in Organ Transplantation*. All are taught with the goal of increasing empathy – on a universal level, but more practically in health care.

"Reading Sylvia Plath and Ken Kesey can't give us a complete picture or full understanding of mental illness," Beckman says, "but it can help us understand a bit more of what it's like to be diagnosed with severe depression or what it's like to suddenly discover your daughter or mother or brother is severely sick. That all leads to empathy."

Many students who opt to pursue a major, minor or graduate certificate in Medical Humanities plan to have careers as clinicians: the doctors, nurses, pharmacists and therapists directly involved in patient care. Others become researchers, medical writers, facility managers and public health officers. The program equips these future health care workers to care for their patients, deal with sometimes difficult circumstances, understand the history of where we've come from and think about the ethical implications of potential medical advances.



Emily Beckman believes the "humanities are more relevant now than ever" in navigating ethical and moral health care questions.

and has made it her life's work to improve clinician/patient interaction. Understanding where people come from. Learning our shared history. Building empathy. *Through the humanities.*

Student preparation

Beckman has taught in the Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Medical Humanities and Health Studies program since 2008 and has served as the director since 2016. The interdisciplinary program aims to equip students with the ability to use the humanities to explore the questions surrounding health care, illness, wellness and death.

IUPUI's program is unique in that it is an undergraduate program housed in the School of Liberal Arts. Most medical humanities programs are graduate level and live in medical schools. The undergraduate program was one of the first in its field, begun by a

Real life application

Recently, a student who graduated from the program stopped by Beckman's office to tell her a story. He's a fourth-year medical student who thought he had a decent grasp on respecting patient privacy and dignity. However, earlier in the summer he found himself communicating with a patient's mother in a way that he said absolutely disrespected her.

He was distraught for a while and couldn't understand why it had happened, but then he reread Perri Klass's short story *Invasions* that Beckman had taught in one of her courses. It helped him think through the interaction he had with the patient's mother.

The story is about the boundaries that are inevitably crossed when you have access to a patient. A patient's records. A patient's body. A patient's health. The student said he thinks about the short story quite often when he's with patients – a story he read in the classroom.

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AUTHOR: Keira Amstutz is president and CEO of Indiana Humanities. This is the final installment of a series focusing on individual Hoosiers who are making a difference by merging STEM and the humanities. Learn more at www.indianahumanities.org/QuantumLeap

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And that, Beckman said, is why she teaches.

Beckman does not think that navigating the ethical, moral and interpersonal questions in health care will get any easier, but that the humanities are more relevant now than ever to help answer these questions.

Future implications

With precision medicine on the horizon, scientists are on the cusp of being able to tailor medication to the individual based on our understanding of the human genome.

While there is benefit in personalized treatment, there also comes a whole host of ethical issues, including the responsibility of potentially seeing difficult aspects of an individual's future and the implications of knowing that future.

In looking ahead, Beckman thinks back to reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in an undergraduate bioethics course.

"Dr. Frankenstein is pursuing something that's never been done before," Beckman recalls. "He can create life out of nothing. There are so many possibilities."

But in those possibilities, potential consequences must be considered.

So as we continue to move forward in health care, we won't stop making discoveries or encountering difficult situations, but we also need to think very carefully about the implications of our choices and how we treat other human beings. Students in IUPUI's program will be at the forefront of knowing how to do just that – *through the humanities*.

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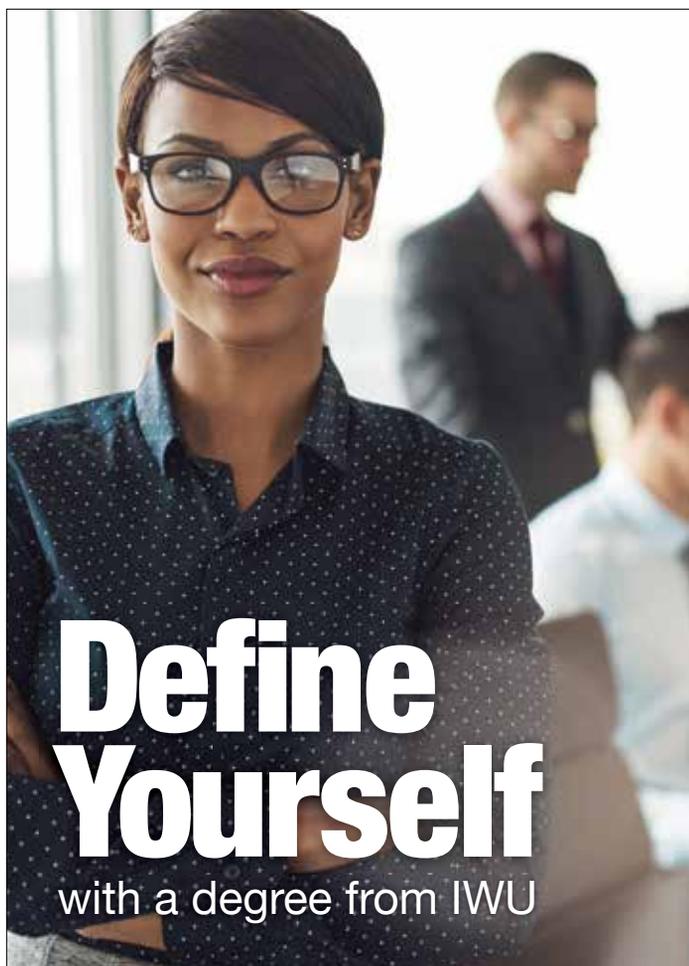
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