

N.J. medical professionals increasingly turn to poetry, literature to improve patient care

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By **Peggy McGlone/The Star-Ledger**

SUMMIT — The group of doctors, social workers and nurses from Overlook Hospital in Summit couldn't decide on a diagnosis, but they were in agreement about the man at the center of their discussion.

They didn't like him and they didn't understand him. So they spent 90 minutes talking about him and his situation, trying to change their initial impressions.

Luckily, the man wasn't a patient but rather the protagonist in Thomas Mann's classic novel, "Death in Venice." And the conversation about him was happening after hours, at a monthly literature and medicine program sponsored by Overlook and the New Jersey Council for the Humanities.

"We see literature as a way for health care workers to reconnect to the humanities of their patients, to see through someone else's eyes and to understand their patient's perspectives," said Mary Rizzo, associate director of the council who runs "Literature & Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare" in six New Jersey hospitals.

"Through studying literature, we learn to be better diagnosticians, better observers, better interviewers, better clinicians," said Nancy Gross, who moderates the program at Overlook.

In hospitals across New Jersey and around the country, medical professionals are increasingly turning to poetry, novels and other forms of literature to help improve patient care. From book clubs to writing seminars to today's Poetry and Medicine Day in Newark, hospitals are encouraging their staff to seek out literature to help increase empathy, learn about new cultures and improve communication among their team.



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Nancy Gross moderates a book club/dinner meeting at Overlook Hospital that is part of a statewide "Literature and Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare" initiative.

"Art always enriches life," said Julia DiGioia, a physician at Overlook who is a member of the book program. "These are human stories. They give us a deeper appreciation of life and a new appreciation of what our patients can endure and triumph over."

Diane Kaufman, a psychiatrist at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey in Newark, sees poetry and writing as integral to her work. As founder of Creative Arts Healthcare, she works with colleagues across the hospital to celebrate the arts.

Today, they present the third-annual "Poetry in Medicine Day," a program featuring a morning lecture by a nationally renowned poetry therapist, workshops with five authors who have written about medical issues and discussions about using stories and poetry in clinical practice.



Tim Farrell/The Star-Ledger

A copy of the Thomas Mann book, "Death in Venice," is noted at a book club/dinner meeting at Overlook Hospital that is part of the statewide "Literature and Medicine: Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare" initiative.

"Medicine is a creative endeavor," Kaufman said. "Sometimes we split ourselves apart. This is a way to bring ourselves together and to announce out loud that we have a creative community here."

Kaufman says studies show the use of arts — music, photography, paintings, writing — can help patients in their recovery.

"The aim is not only emotional uplifting, but to see if there are fewer needs for one-on-one nursing, less pain medication," she said.

Gross uses various genres, from memoirs to poetry collections to non-fiction stories. Some address medical issues directly, while others, like the recent "Death in Venice," provide insight into broader topics such as how people who are dying experience their last moments and how caregivers can look past their personal feelings when dealing with patients.

In addition to increasing empathy and understanding of patients, the program also aims to build community among medical professionals and ameliorate burn-out, Gross said.

Rizzo said this is especially important in hospital settings, where departments are like silos.

"It gives people a space to talk, and because you're talking about characters in literature, it becomes safer," Rizzo said. "Hospitals are very hierarchical, so people getting together once a month to talk to their co-workers is sort of a radical idea."

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