

Art, Empathy, and Reducing Burnout

In reading the article “Art in Medical Education: A Review” by Dalia and colleagues, we were pleased to see that medical education programs in art have focused not only on improving student and trainee clinical and observational skills but also on reflective skills and empathy.¹ While burnout is a prevalent issue both in undergraduate and graduate medical education, higher empathy scores may be protective against burnout.² We believe that, in addition to the various interventions implemented to decrease trainee burnout, incorporating arts into medical education may be another tool at our disposal to promote empathy and, therefore, reduce burnout.^{3,4}

Though not every medical school has established fine arts courses, one method of incorporating art into medical education that is accessible to all students is a student-led art magazine. Last year, we founded a student group designed to curate, showcase, and distribute student-created art and literature in a publication now known as the “Feinberg Art Book.” The intent behind this endeavor was to encourage medical students to pursue artistic talents during rigorous periods of study and to provide a space for recognition and discussion of student work that may not otherwise be appreciated.

Whereas solicitation for art and writing to be included in the art magazine took place in fall and winter 2019 when students were surrounded by peers in classrooms, small groups, and on the wards, publication came at a time when medical students of all years were away from the classroom and sheltering in place in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic. While words and phrases such as “social distancing,” “isolation,” and “quarantine” became the dominant topic of conversation and preoccupation, the online publication of the Feinberg Art Book provided a space for medical students to ponder, reflect, and engage their peers. We found that empathy is not developed exclusively when surround-

ed by others but can be a solitary journey in which the form and material of art builds connection and promotes shared perspectives.

Along with formal fine arts curricula and instruction in medical education, we recommend that medical educators support trainees in informal interaction with the arts. Reflection, empathy, and connection are demonstrated ways to promote resilience and reduce burnout.^{4,5} Let us then embrace art in all it can provide.

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References

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