HEALING BEYOND SCIENCE: THE ROLE OF ART AND HUMANITIES IN MEDICINE

Chinazor Roseline Okpokwasili

Abstract

This paper examines the vital role of the arts and humanities in enriching medical practice and expanding the scope of healing beyond scientific intervention. While biomedicine prioritizes diagnosis, treatment, and technological advancement, it often falls short in addressing the emotional, psychological, and existential needs of patients. Drawing on disciplines such as literature, visual art, music, philosophy, and medical ethics, this study highlights how these fields cultivate empathy, enhance communication skills, and foster reflective practice among healthcare professionals. Through a multidisciplinary lens, the paper underscores the transformative potential of integrating humanistic approaches into healthcare education and practice. The study also utilizes concepts like symbolism, bioethics, meditation and the chakra system to lay the groundwork in understanding how medicine exists symbiotically with art and humanities. The findings advocate for a more holistic model of medicine- one that balances scientific rigor with compassionate, person-centred care, ultimately promoting healing that addresses both body and spirit.

Keywords: medicine, humanities, symbiotic relationship, art, symbolism.

Introduction

The dynamic nature of society is reflected on the dynamic nature of humans. As thinking beings, human beings strive to discover and invent new ways to make life easier and convenient for themselves. This has brought about technological development, industrialization and medicine. This study delves into the intersection and intricate relationship between medicine, arts, culture and humanities. Often referred to as medical humanities, the intersection of medicine, arts and humanities is a growing interdisciplinary field that explores the relationship between healthcare and the human experience. Medicine, while rooted in science and scientific principles and values, is profoundly influenced by cultural beliefs, artistic expression and social contexts. Cultural factors significantly shape health-seeking behaviours, disease perceptions, and the efficacy of medical interventions, influence how societies understand the body, define illness and approach treatment, impact healthcare practices and patient outcomes. Historically, art, literature and philosophy have been used to explore themes of health, illness, suffering and healing. Also, the integration of arts into medical practices, such as therapy, music therapy and narrative medicine demonstrates the potential for enhancing patient's wellbeing, improving communication between patients and providers, and fostering a more holistic approach to healthcare. Studies have shown that patients whose healthcare providers engage in one aspect of art or another like therapy, singing, dancing, creativity, storytelling, visual arts like painting or drawing, or reading and analysing literature, tend to develop a higher sense of connection and an improved communication with their healthcare providers, the providers in turn develops a higher sense of empathy and understanding for their

patients and their illness or diseases, as well as relieving their stress and preventing burnout. By recognizing the interplay between medicine, art and culture, we can develop more culturally sensitive, patient-centred, and effective healthcare providers. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of integrating the arts and humanities into medicine due to such factors as increase focus on patient-centred care which focuses on treating the whole person rather than just the disease; and advances in medical technology to reinstate humanistic values in medicine.

Dating back to ancient civilizations, the arts and humanities have been integral to the practice of medicine. In Greek mythology, Apollo was the god of healing and diseases, music and poetry, truth and prophecy, and more, and it was to Apollo that Hippocrates dedicated his famous oath reminding us that "there is art to medicine as well as science." The 20th century was marked by a rising predominance of science and technology in medicine and medical education. Flexner's influential, and controversial, (1910) report called for an educationally rigorous scientific base for medicine. Practically, this brought about the traditional 2+2 curricular structure, as well as evidence-informed teaching and more rigorous assessments. Still, many notable physicians have upheld the essential need for interweaving humanistic practice and scientific rigor into practice of medicine. Osler, (1907), for example, called medicine "an old art [that] … must be absorbed in the new science."

The Evolution of Medicine

Medicine in ancient times was irretrievably linked to magic, religion and superstition. Illness was often associated with divine punishment and an attack of evil and malevolent spirits, and anyone who could cure another's ailment was either seen as a sage or a witch/ wizard. Yet, with these superstitious beliefs, herbs, bone settings, tonics and surgical intervention – and in Asia, acupuncture, yin and yang and connection to the chakras – were still utilized to assist in the curing of the ailment. During the renaissance, a renewed interest in human anatomy was cultivated. From then down to the 18th and 19th, and then finally, the 20th and 21st century, more medical discoveries and inventions were made. Vaccination, antibiotics, and anaesthesia were developed, safe and intense surgeries were learnt, organ transplant, DNA, gene mirroring and so on, have all been developed and improved upon to make the treatment of illness easier and more efficient. Through the evolution of medicine from the idea of magic and supernatural intervention, to knowledgeable science, one form of art or another has accompanied it. Historically, the art of healing was accompanied by either ritualistic songs and dances or another form of art. Likewise, in modern medicine, with the understanding of the human person as not just a body to be cured or healed but a person to be understood and sympathized with, literature, drama, singing, dancing, support groups, etc. have been initiated into medicine to assist patients in their recovery.

Art and Humanities

Humanities is viewed as an academic discipline which studies human culture and condition, using analytical, critical or speculative methods. Humanities as a whole delves into philosophy, history, literature, languages, religious studies, ethics, and anthropology. Some scholars use arts and

humanities interchangeably. However, as much as arts and humanities share common goals of the understanding of the human situation, they are two distinct fields. Other scholars view humanities in relations with science but not quite the physical science, considering the German philosopher Wilhelm (2002b), who referred to the term as 'human sciences' or 'spiritual sciences', referring to them as 'those areas of knowledge that lay outside of, and beyond, the subject matter of the physical science.' Humanities goes beyond mere understanding to embrace disciplines that explore the human condition, meaning, values and social structures. Art has no clear definition. Some see it as a visual representation of creativity, others assert that it can be visual and non-visual. Throughout history, art has seen different definitions depending on who defining it and what purpose it serves for the person. Plato (1997) sees it as anything that is 'representational' or 'mimetic', Kant (2000) says it is 'representational, formalist and expressive' focusing on aesthetic judgment, Hegel (2000) likens art to beauty and defines beauty as the 'perceptual appearance or expression of absolute truth.' Art is communicative. Whether it is real or fiction, art communicate to the human mind and excites emotions. Art is an aspect in humanities. It is music, dance, painting, theatre, creative writing, etc. Any forms of human expression and communication can be seen as art.

The Integration between Medicine, Arts and Humanities

"The word 'humanities' was originally 'humanitas' from Latin. Borrowed by the English language, it means HUMANE FEELING which included sympathy, empathy, compassion, pity, concern or caring" (Jones, 2019). The idea of humanities is to study how humans think, act, create and relate with one another… to understand diverse perspectives and perhaps, peacefully coexist with others. Medicine, which does not only concern drugs used to treat ailments, but every art designed to keep a person sane and healthy, can be overwhelming at times. Medical humanities is concerned with the science of the human. It brings perspectives of history, philosophy, literature, visual arts, cultural studies and music to enhance our understanding of health, illness, human condition and the medicine.

The intersection between medicine, arts and humanities is often referred to as medical humanities. The term has been defined by many scholars but one thing holds steady in these definitions. It is the interaction between the art of healing and curing illness and disease and the understanding the person with the disease. McFarlane (2022) defines medical humanities as "both an interdisciplinary field of enquiry, combining methodologies from humanities with the study of medicine…" Evans (2002) defines medical humanities as an integrated, interdisciplinary, philosophical approach to recording and interpreting human experiences of illness, disability, and medical intervention". Klugman (2017) says it is "an interdisciplinary field concerned with understanding human condition of health and illness in order to create knowledgeable and sensitive health care providers, patients, and family caregivers". The idea of medical humanities is that it draws on the "creative and intellectual strengths of diverse disciplines including literature, art, creative writing, drama, anthropology, and history in the pursuit of medical educational goals" (Kirklin, 2003).

A few medical practitioners are just that – practitioners, whether a doctor, nurse, psychologist or any other title they bear. They lack the empathy to truly care for a patient, failing to understand that humane attitudes can help speed up a person's recovery as much as the treatment and medical care. The idea of integrating medicine with arts and humanities is borne by the need to consider the emotional, social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of a patient's life. It is aimed at treating the person rather than just the illness or disease. A terminal illness should not feel like a burden like that of someone on a death roll. Making the person's last moments worthwhile is not just the job of the family and love ones, but also that of the medical professionals, who make the patient understand that they see them and not just their ailment. In one of his many quotes, Hippocrates (2018) says "it is far more important to know what person the disease has than what disease the person has". This goes to show that merely diagnosing a person and prescribing treatment is not enough, the medical practitioner needs to understand this person and create a communication link, perhaps, to establish trust. This is linked to a branch of medicine known as *Narrative Medicine*, which involves listening to and interpreting the patient's stories.

"The relationship between art and medicine dates back to ancient times when medical procedures and teachings were depicted in tombs, on papyrus, and on clay tablets" (Kashaka, 2024 p. 1). Visual and non-visual arts play significant roles in understanding the patient's and doctor's experience. This is because as much as medical practitioners are professionals in their field, some lack the 'human' side of their medical training. Kashaka (2024) says that "a successful doctor should wish well to patients and inspire emotions that can bring health… (it is) only by experiencing the patient's plight can the reflexes of a humanistic and ethical tradition converge". The interaction between medicine, art and humanities goes beyond incorporative the known literature of art into the art of medicine. Developing a working communication strategy is an integral aspect because empathy is not well known except when there is communication gap. Quoting Khomazyuk, and Vasylyeva (2024) notes that "communication skills are a key to successful medical practice".

"Art and medicine have always grown and inspired each other so heavily in defining and supporting the basic issues of human existence – vulnerability and strength, illness and healing, birth and death…" (Mwende, 2024). In ancient times, even till this day, art has served as a vehicle to transport emotions and feelings of empathy. Music was included in ceremonies of laughter or sadness, dirges were sung at funerals and lullabies were sung to make a baby sleep or stop crying. Music has been used since centuries "not only as a culturally specific manifestation of various human communities for inter-socialization, but also as an empirical therapeutic procedure, with psychical recovery effects" (Gaiseanu, 2020). Music, like every other art forms, has profound impact on human beings. This is why all art forms are being harnessed to enhance human health and wellbeing. From history, medicine, art and culture have also worked hand in hand. Ritual healing and cleansing were always accompanied with singing, dancing and even drumming. While literature, poetry, and personal accounts articulate the lived experiences of the patient – sickness, pain and recovery – culture provides the bedrock on which the health practices and beliefs are built. Art embodies a lot of the diverse aspects of humanity from music, dance, dress, food, festival, to religion and spirituality. Understanding every aspect of the human person can go a long way to

truly communicate and create a connection with a person. Religion and spirituality, for instance, shapes how a person views sickness, what they consider sickness and health, how they intend to be treated, and how they define recovery. Understanding this diversity in cultural beliefs is crucial to healthcare providers to enable them execute and deliver competent and sensitive care that respects patient's personal values. In recent times, hospitals worldwide are utilizing art, like music programs and creative writing initiatives to create a more healing and humane spaces for patients, their families and the professional staffs. Some even include literature classes, music therapies and leisure music classes to assist in the patients' recovery, Music and dance section for the pregnant women as part of the antenatal. However, it is important to note that the integration of art and humanity into the field of medicine do not only benefit the patients but also benefits the medical professionals. Burnouts, anxiety and mental stress can be overwhelming and these professionals would need something to reconnect them to the humanistic core of their profession. With this, they tend to love their job, seeing it as an art to be enjoyed rather than a nerve wreaking job.

Art in Medicine

"The historical relationships between the arts and medicine are rare and expansive" (Kyomugisha 2024). The integration between medicine, art and culture is a broad spectrum, reaching out to touch diverse areas of medicine and human wellbeing. The study, knowledge and application of principles of art and humanities to medicine is beneficial in more ways than can be exhausted. Scott (2000) asserts that the contribution of art, particularly literature, to medicine through an insight into common patterns of response (common and shared experience), insight into individual difference or uniqueness, and enrichment of language and thoughts.

> A work of art potentially provides one with sufficient imaginative insight to recognize general pattern of emotion and human response, which are not reducible to purely physical, biological mechanisms… An exposure to the arts may help produce a tolerance for ambiguity and individual difference…. Literature enriches the language and thus the thought processes of practitioners; in a manner which provides a wealth of concepts and ideas with which to think about and conceptualize patient care. (Scott, 5 – 7).

Art and humanities in medicine is grossly underrated across spheres. The importance of incorporating arts and humanities in medicine spans through a wide range of benefits not only for the patients and their love ones, but also for the professional medical practitioner. Literature develops an empathic kind of sympathy. Downie (1991) says that "imaginative literature can develop in a doctor or nurse a perception of real need literature can be a help in coming to terms with the emotions and conflicts which are raised in anyone caring for those who are ill. The same is true of those dealing with problems of bereavement… Questions of the meaning of life, of the tragedy and tears built into human relationships, inevitably arise in such situations and require some sort of answer if the life of professional care is to seem worthwhile. Literature can deal with these issues with an immediacy lacking in the abstractions of philosophy or social sciences. Literature therefore develops sympathy of the passive or empathetic kind.

Hippocrates (2018) believes that it is impossible to separate true humanity from medical practices. In one of his numerous quotes, he asserts that wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of humanity. The field of medical humanities emerged post-World War II, focusing on the intersection of medicine with various humanities disciplines like literature, history, philosophy, and ethics, aiming to enrich medical education and practice through critical thinking, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the patient experience.

Symbolism, Bioethics, Meditation and the Chakra System

Symbolism is an art or practice of using symbols to express invisible and intangible such as an artistic representation or imitation or the use of conventional or traditional signs in the representation of divine beings and spirits. It is an artistic and poetic style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and state of mind. Symbolism in medicine, art and humanities is used to explore the intricate meanings and cultural significance of health, illness, and the healthcare experience. It involves examining how the body reflects societal values, personal identities, and cultural beliefs about health and disease. Symbolism in medical humanities include, but is not limited to the human body, objects in the medical profession, and figurative or literary devices and expressions. The human body represents not just the person or their state of health, but also their strength, vulnerability, and identity, carrying cultural and social meaning, considering how different cultures view body image, cleanliness, and the appropriate ways to interact with the body in health and illness. Objects such as stethoscopes, syringe, medical charts, and the lab coat hold intrinsic symbols beyond their functional use. The stethoscope could be seen as a link or connection between the patient and the medical practitioners; while the syringe can symbolize medical intervention or help for the patient. One importance of symbolism in medicine, arts and humanities is its role in encouraging critical analysis of the language, imagery, and cultural meanings embedded in healthcare practices and experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of health, illness and the human conditions.

Bioethics is the study of ethical issues arising in the biological sciences, medicine and healthcare. It is concerned with the moral dimensions of medical practice, research, and policy, often drawing on insights from the arts and humanities to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the human experience of illness, health, and medical treatment. Bioethics is understood in the broader sense as the study of moral questions or aspects from within medicine and other biological sciences.

Meditation is a way of achieving mental discipline. It is the practice that involves training one's mind to focus and achieve a state of mental clarity and emotional calm. One major benefit of meditation is that it helps to reduce both physical and mental stress, improve focus, and enhance overall wellbeing. There are techniques to meditation, some of which include focusing on breath, a specific object, a mantra, or an image or idea. Meditation is beneficial to both the patient and the medical practitioner as it helps reduce tension of the reality of one's situation, focusing on the bigger picture, depending on the spiritual belief and values of the persons involved.

The chakra system refers to seven energy points or centres within the body that are believed to influence physical, emotional, ad spiritual well-being. The idea of the chakra system or subtler bodies originates from ancient Indian traditions. The thing about subtler bodies or chakra is that it has to do with the inner being of a person. It consists of that part of a person that deals with the subconscious being, focusing on the emotional, psychological, and mental parts of person. There are seven (7) chakra points which once mastered, gives the practitioner superb control over his or her being; they are: Crown, 3rd Eye, Throat, Heart, Solar Plexus, Sacral, and Root. Mastery of the chakra system can be done through meditation, yogic breathing exercise, among others.

The relevance of symbolism, bioethics, meditation and the chakra system to medicine, art and humanities is found in their definitions and application. Symbols like the stethoscope and the syringe represents connection between the medical practitioner and the patients, and hope of recovery, respectively. Bioethics like the encompassing nature of medical humanities deals with morals of the application of the rules of science. Like Kopelman (1988) asserts, medical humanities and bioethics are engaged in complex questions about the human condition, many of which are both serious and urgent. Meditation helps both the medical practitioner and the patient attain a certain level of mind control of mastery, being in charge of their emotions. Finally, mastery of the chakra system helps to achieve the same things that meditation helps with, and beyond. The chakra system deals with more than just the mental state of a person, but also the internal being, beyond the mind, reaching into the soul and connecting with the spiritual and metaphysical being.

Medicine, arts and humanities is interwoven with philosophy, religion, psychology, literature, and cosmology. Sometime ago, epilepsy was considered a divine ailment because no one knew its cause or origin. As time developed, scientists were able to identify the cause of epilepsy and subsequently, its cure and treatment. However, there remain sickness and ailments that no cure has been found for. What then happens to such patients? Are they to be left to wither with time?

Often referred to as the father of medicine, Hippocrates (2018) significantly shaped early medical ethics and emphasized observation as the core of the art of healing. He stressed on the importance of observation of a patient's symptoms and the natural causes of illness, with a focus on practical knowledge and ethical conduct, accompanied by the need to help the patient while minimizing harm. In another of his quotes, he says 'to help or at least to do no harm'. Hippocrates saw the medical practitioner as a guide who helps with the patient's natural healing processes, rather than a mere source of healing. His ideas of medicine, health, and wellbeing in connection with arts and humanities lay the bedrock for ethical practices in modern medicine.

Cassell (1985) emphasizes the need to establish good communication with patients. He submits that "the spoken language is our most important diagnostic and therapeutic too, and we must be as precise in its usage as is a surgeon with a scalpel". The role of art and humanities in medicine have an expanse of benefits. Communication creates a link between patients and medical practitioners, music, literature, theatre, dance, poetry, etc., help to alleviate a patient's pain and ease their way to recovery. Also, music therapy and music medicine tend to affect the mental state of not just the patient, but also the medical practitioner, releasing tension and stress, while releasing positive emotions.

Conclusion

The integration of art and the humanities into medical practice underscores a transformative approach to healing-one that goes beyond the confines of scientific diagnosis and treatment. While the biomedical science addresses the physical dimension of illness, the arts and humanities engage the emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual facets of human experience. Literature, music, visual arts, philosophy, and history provide vital tools for cultivating empathy, enhancing communication, and promoting holistic patientcare. This human-centred model enriches clinical practice, foster deeper patient-doctor relationships, and improves overall well-being.

Chinazor Roseline Okpokwasili
Department of Music,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
lottycee36@gmail.com

References

Cassells, E. (1985). "*Talking with Patients": The Theory of Doctor-Patient Communication*. The MIT Press.

Downie, R.S. (1991). Literature and Medicine: *Journal of Medical Ethics. Vol. 17. Pg. 96.*

Evans, M. (2002). Reflections on the Humanities in Medical Education. *Journal of Medical Education. 36: 508-513.*

Flexner, A. (1910). Medical Education in the United States and Canada. New York, NY. Caregie Foundation for the Advancement of teaching.

Gaiseanu, F. (2020). Multitask Music-Based Therapy Optimization in Aging Neurorehability by Activation of the Informational Cognitive Centers of Consciousness: Gerontology and Geriatric Studies. Crimson Publishers. Pg. 621.

Hegel (2000). "*Hegel and the Art of Painting" in Hegel and Aesthetics* (ed.) W. Maker Albany. Suny Press. 61-82.

Jones, T. (2019). *Visual culture/Visual activism in the health humanities classroom*. In Banner O. Carlin, N., Cole, T, (eds.) Teaching Health Humanities. New York, NY, Oxford University Press.

Kant, I. (2000). *Critique of the Power of Judgment, Trans.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kashaka, N. D. (2024). Art as a Medium for Discussing Ethical Issues in Medicine. *Research Output Journal of Education. Faculty of Education, Kampala International University, Uganda.* Pg. 1.

Khomazuyuk, T. A. & Vasylyeva, T. L (2024). Medicine in the 21st Century: How not to lose the Art of Healing. *Journal of Internal Medicine: Science and Art. Vol. 5*

Kirklin, D. (2003). The Centre for Medical Humanities, Royal Free and University College Medical School, London.

Klugman, C.M. (2017). Medical Humanities: Teaching in North American Allopathic and Osteopathic Medical School. *Journal of Medical Humanities.*

Kopelman, L.M. (1988). Bioethics and humanities: what makes us one field? Journal of Medicine and Philosophy. Vol. 23 (4). Pg. 356.

Kyomugisha, A.T. (2024). The Impact of Historical Art Movement on Medicine. *Newport International Journal of Current Issues in Arts and Management. Pg. 31*

McFarlane, A. (2022). *Medical Humanities*. Palgrave Handbook of Critical Post humanism. Pg. 1

Mwende, M.D. (2024). The Impact of Cultural Shifts on Art and Medicine. Eurasian Experiment Journal of Scientific and Applied Research. Pg. 42.

Osler, W. (1907). The Reserves of Life. St. Mary's Hospital Gazette 13: 95-98.

Plato (1997). Complete Works, Cooper, John M. (ed.) Indianapolis: Hackett.

Scott, A.P. (2000). The Relationship between the Arts and Medicine, *Journal of Medicial Humanities. Vol. 26. pg. 5.*

Wilhelm, D. (2002b). "*The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences" in Selected Works.* Vol. 3, pp. 101- 209. Wilhelm Dilthey ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Internet Source

Britainica.com. https://www.britannica.com/topic/humanities. Retrieved 14th June, 2025.

Hippocrates. 2018. Hippocrates. Accessed June 13, https://www.goodreads.com/author/qoutes/248774.