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New program to combine medicine and the arts: The Maine Arts & Humanities in Medicine Fellowship

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Some people consider themselves to be a numbers person, more than a creative type. Others feel drawn to the artistic side of life more than the analytical. Since the 1960s, when Nobel-prize winning research painted a picture of a human brain split straight down the middle – it is believed that humans are either right or left brain dominated. People associate with logic, critical thinking, and mathematics – or art, expression, and creativity.

But what if there was a way to cross that great divide?

Recent research from the University of Utah has shown that the right-brain, left-brain mentality might be more myth than fact. And the new Maine Medical Arts & Humanities in Medicine Fellowship, developed by collaborators at the University of Maine and Northern Light Health, “Maine Arts & Humanities in Medicine Fellowship,” aims to prove that individuals who combine the traditionally separated characteristics are destined for success.

Doctors who complete their residency requirements at Northern Light Family Medicine and Residency in Bangor will have the opportunity to obtain a certificate of advanced learning from UMaine through the year-long fellowship.

The fellowship is open to graduate students or residency program graduates. Fellows will take courses on creativity and research methodology, attend a weekly seminar to discuss various contemporary topics in medicine with their other fellows, and produce a project worthy of publication or public display. The display could be a musical or theatrical performance, a graphic arts presentation, or a fine arts exhibition. The medical residents continue to keep up their clinical skills by attending a clinic two days a week where they are actively treating patients and implementing what they learn in real-life situations.

Shaping the future of health and wellbeing

Owen Smith, Ph.D., director of UMaine’s Master of Fine Arts program, pioneered the idea for the fellowship with Patrick McFarlane, MSN, MSW, MA, director of Behavioral Health at Northern Light Family Medicine & Residency, and David Loxtercamp, MD, also on faculty at Northern Light Health.

Smith believes the program would provide benefits to both the residency students and their patients. The fellowship will involve courses that challenge students in the way they think about problem solving – and encourage them to bridge the gap between arts and sciences, between the right-brain and the left-brain. Smith says creating a program that integrates students from the medical fields with those from arts and
humanities will create a unique set of opportunities and challenges that will shape how we think about wellness in the future.

“Together, the arts and sciences can ask each other difficult questions, share vocabularies and build trust by blending multiple perspectives on complex society issues, such as those connected to medicine and public health,” says the formal proposal developed by Smith, McFarlane, and Loxterkamp. “Creativity matters in both the lab and the studio, as both a reflection of the artist, the physician and/or patient within their environment, but it also has the potential to directly impact the medical encounter and the efficacy of a medicine or medical intervention.”

In art programs students are asked, “who is my audience and how do I relate to them?” Having this training will allow doctors to do the same, to conceptualize how they relate and connect to their patients in order to give them the best medical experience.

The arts and humanities fellowship is not simply teaching an alternative way of problem solving – but changing the quality of life for people in the medical practice. Providing a direct way to respond to the high incidence of burnout and mental health care for residents working 80-plus hours per week without much release.

“We aim to give participants in the program something of real significance and that in both indirect and direct ways can not only respond to the high incidence of burnout, but increase ones quality of life” says Smith.

“There can be a lot of mental health concerns with people in the health care business because they have so much put on them, and in some cases, without many forms of relief.”

Implementing arts and humanities in medical training

The fellowship holds prominent potential to attract medical residents, as the program would be an added bonus to a resident's application to medical programs, because they would be able to tout their graduate certificate in arts and medicine on top of their normal BA. Additionally, the program will prepare future medical professionals for implementing arts and humanity values in their future work.

“In our personal lives we have discovered the importance of the arts and the humanities, and we are deeply committed to making that available to graduate students,” says Loxterkamp. “These interests [in the arts and humanities] are often put on the back-burner during medical training and we are trying to move that interest to the front-burner.”

The inaugural Maine Arts and Humanities in Medicine Fall Workshop, scheduled for Oct. 26, 2019 in Belfast, serves as a prelude to the launch of the fellowship in the summer of 2020. Maine. The workshop “welcomes Northern New England family medicine faculty, residents, and others with an interest in the arts and humanities in family medicine education and healthcare,” according to the Northern Light Health website.

Students have the unique opportunity to learn to combine those stereotypical traits of the right-brain and the left-brain to create a new normal: medical practices that improve the quality of life for both doctors and patients by increasing connections and providing creative outlets for expression; and they are the first in the country to do so.

The Maine Arts & Humanities in Medicine Fellowship is the first of its kind in the country and unique in its collaborative relationship between a community hospital and state university. It has the potential to raise the profile and recruiting potential of both organizations, and attract an outstanding array of students to both campuses.

“For me, the ultimate measure of success will be to learn how fellowship graduates have integrated the arts and humanities into their medical practices five or ten years out,” says Loxterkamp.

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