

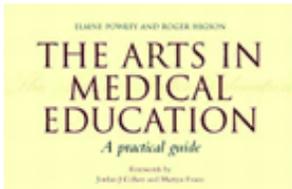
BMJ 2005;331:1480 (17 December), doi: 10.1136/bmj.331.7530.1480-a

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Book

The Arts in Medical Education: A Practical Guide

The older I get the more in awe I become of the achievements of scientific medicine. I also have personal reasons to be grateful, as my little Gracie had an atrial septal defect (ASD) and only a few years ago she would have been condemned to a life of progressive disability. But, thanks to the incredible skill and care from Dr Frank Casey and his team at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Belfast, she is now as healthy and happy and cheeky as any other 7 year old.



Elaine Powley, Roger Higson

Radcliffe, £40, pp 160
ISBN 1 85775 626 6

Rating: ★★★★★

Her ASD was closed by angiography; a simple statement, but just imagine for a moment the number of different advanced technologies employed to make the diagnosis and perform the procedure. Fibre optics, ultrasonics, materials science, and a myriad others—all these disciplines meshed unerringly together, all products of centuries of methodical experiment laced with occasional flashes of genius, knowledge that has been painstakingly earned, often at the cost of persecution and prejudice. And all to help one little child.

These miracles are now commonplace and so we take them for granted and complain when science doesn't have all the answers. Of course, it is totally our fault for expecting that it should. For most of the patients I see every day in the surgery, cold science and cool reason have only a minor part to play. Science needs a problem to solve; often we do not actually know what the problem is, who actually has the problem, or if any problem actually exists. No clinical textbook is of any use for these indecipherables and imponderables.

We doctors live on the cusp of the great beyond; science takes us only so far, but then the maps stop—"here be dragons," they say, the grey areas of intuition and imagination and feelings. Fortunately these are powerful weapons, and the role of art is to show us how best to employ them. I learnt more about the human mind from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* than I did from any psychiatry textbook. We understand human frailty because we also are human and frail, and the art of medicine is to appreciate and

respond to these frailties in the right way. Every one of us has suffered, so we can empathise with Van Gogh's self portrait—the artist and the observer and the shared experience, the doctor and the patient and the mutual understanding.

In contrast to the hard earned truths of scientific medicine, this is all vague and uncertain; art is so nebulous that anyone claiming to

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be teaching it should probably be hunted down with wild dogs. Pinning it down in some kind of structured straitjacket is almost a contradiction.

But this is exactly what the authors of this book have tried to do. They have devised a teaching primer, "a practical manual for teachers in healthcare," covering, among other things, poetry, prose, music, the visual arts, and nice walks in the country. When I first read the title I had a brief vision of long lines of bluffers who could not get proper jobs using this to give phoney workshops to the gullible and vulnerable.

However, mea culpa, I was agreeably surprised. Even for someone like me who lives so far out in the wilds that cave paintings are considered rather art nou-veau, this book was interesting and stimulating, and it does provide a plausible and manageable framework to teach something so intangible, which should prove useful to all medical educators (as long as they can keep the pseudos away). It also includes a dinky little CD to accompany the music section.

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