How literature and popular movies can help in medical education: applications for teaching the doctor–patient relationship

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Editor – It is not very original to claim that explaining the peculiarities of the doctor–patient relationship to pre-clinical medical students is an uneasy task. In general, most students are trained in diseases, not in patients. Later, bedside teaching may help, but often the clinical picture is perceived as being more important than the psychosocial aspects of the sick person. Furthermore, inadequate role modelling by some tutors may make the acquisition of these attitudes and competences difficult. Lectures may be inadequate to teach these issues, as they do not encourage full interaction with students. Therefore, alternative methods of approaching such issues should be welcomed.

Literature and films provide new ways of introducing medical students to the reality of their future activities. In this letter, I would like to comment on 2 literary works, The Case of Dr Sachs and A Taste of my own Medicine: When the Doctor is the Patient, as well as the movies that were inspired by them (La Maladie de Sachs and The Doctor). I believe that they may help medical students to better understand their future profession.

The Case of Dr Sachs tells the story of a French doctor practising in a rural area. In this work, patients are pictured as ordinary people who are afflicted by ailments that are rarely depicted in medical textbooks. The inability to avoid the complexities of human behaviour and experience happiness defines Sachs’ sickness, to which the title of the novel refers. The symptoms of his disease involve excessive worry about his work of caring for other people, to a point where he neglects to care for himself and devotes most of his time to doctoring. In A Taste of my own Medicine: When the Doctor is the Patient, the author describes how it feels to be diagnosed with a severe disease, the initial mistakes some colleagues make until the diagnosis is definite, the lengthy treatment and all the feelings of uncertainty and fear that accompany these experiences. The book is especially revealing about how a doctor might feel when he is treated as a patient and how he considers the disease from the perspective of a patient after practising medicine for many years. However, from the teaching point of view, it may be easier to use the films than the literary works, as a viewing and subsequent discussion can be conveniently scheduled to fit into an afternoon.

Both the literary works and the films portray important aspects of the medical profession, but I would like to focus on the doctor–patient relationship. Ultimately, the issue concerns how a doctor can remain sensitive to the demands of his or her patients, while avoiding excessive emotional implications in each case (as in Sachs’ illness). Medical educators should try to convey the need for such sensitivity to their students. I believe that the films and literary works described in this letter may help students to look at patients in a very different way.

REFERENCES

5 Suchman AL, Markakis K, Beckman HB, Frankel R. A model of empathic communication in the medical interview. JAMA 1997;277:678–82.