



Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare™

The role of literature & humanities in medicine



NEW HAMPSHIRE
humanities

By Hannah Jean, International Institute of New England, and Mary Nolin, New Hampshire Humanities

On a brisk morning in October, a small group of women came to class in the basement of the International Institute of New England (IINE) in Manchester. Coming from El Salvador, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nepal, and Vietnam, the women are not only learning critical content for Licensed Nursing Assistant (LNA) jobs in a healthcare field ravaged by the pandemic, but are learning English in the process.

In one hand they held the textbook *Hartman's Nursing Assistant Care*, which is used in their LNA coursework. In the other hand, they had a piece of children's literature, *Tashi and the Tibetan Flower Cure*. The relationship between the two books, as well as the larger relationship between medicine and the humanities, generates multiple questions – most importantly – what role do the humanities and literature play in the medical field?

Hannah Jean, course instructor and career navigator at IINE, had a vision to pair a medical textbook with children's literature

provided by the New Hampshire Humanities *Connections* program, to improve both English language acquisition and encouraging a more holistic approach to healthcare. **“My goal for this book discussion was to work on the students’**

reading comprehension skills and teach them the importance of compassionately caring for others before they head off to clinical training. I wanted my students to understand that being present for someone during an illness and caring for them as a person is just as important as any medical care they will give their patients, a point this book exemplified for them in a way the textbook cannot.” In *Tashi and the Tibetan Flower Cure*, a Tibetan-American grandfather falls ill and

his condition worsens, despite continued visits to the doctor. Leveraging the power of community, family, and nature, the grandfather's health starts to improve.

Traditionally, medical textbooks are science focused and

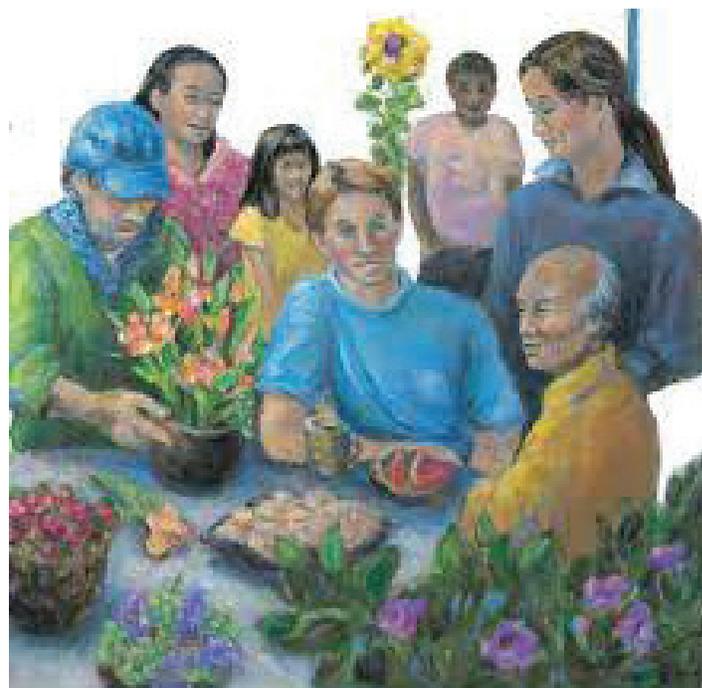
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pertain to specific health conditions. For example, in Hannah's class students had to read an article called *Dying with a Stage IV Pressure Ulcer*, which highlights failures of the U.S. eldercare system. While this often gives students a lot to think about, it can often cause students to feel overwhelmed and have an unclear picture about what they can do to help improve care within our flawed healthcare system.

Comparatively, *Tashi and the Tibetan Flower Cure* demonstrated the power of community and how treating the whole person, and not just their health problem, can illustrate to students what holistic care looks like in action. It showed that traditional medicine from different cultures can safely be adapted to a facility setting and gave students the concrete steps they needed to successfully implement holistic health care in a clinical setting. The resulting discussions deepened student understanding of why compassionate and empathetic LNAs are important. **"This cohort did much better in their clinicals than the cohorts before them, and I firmly believe that it was at least in part because they read and discussed Tashi,"** asserts Hannah. In addition to success in their clinical studies, the book provided opportunities for learning English. It raised questions around larger issues in healthcare, generating a critical discussion on the state of the eldercare system in the U.S. and what the role of the community should be.

For Hannah, one moment resonated in particular: **"When I asked what the role of the community should be in caring for residents in long-term care facilities, students shared their experiences with care in their home countries and how different it is from what they observed in the U.S."**

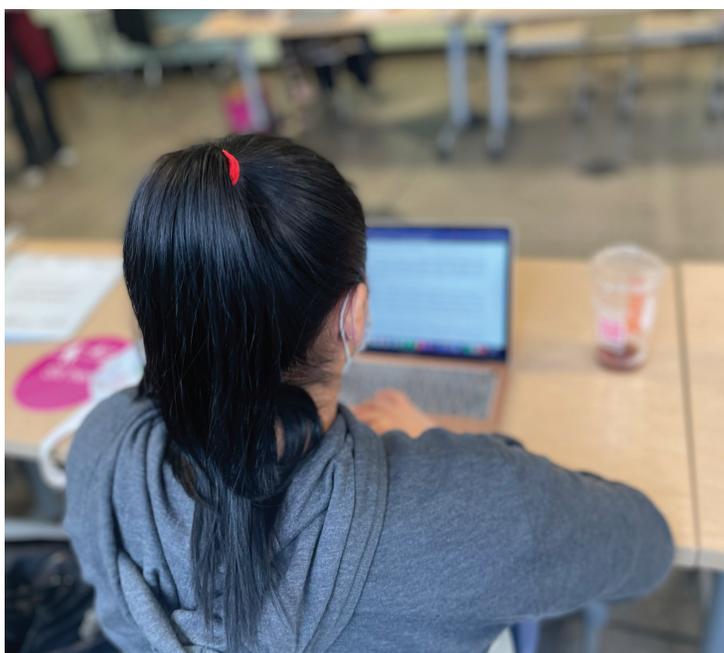


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One student revealed that she cared for older relatives in her home country before coming here. Another student mentioned she is afraid to grow old here because care is so expensive. She worries her son may decide not to help take care of her and that she may be alone. Both students noted that in the nursing home where they work, the residents receive few visits from their families."

While medicine continues to make great technical progress, the personal connection and communication at the heart of a

patient/caregiver relationship is falling behind. The strain of the pandemic has caused burnout, exhaustion, and workforce shortages across our healthcare system, ultimately affecting patient care. Literature can help bridge the gap between medical providers and patients by connecting the world of science with the world of lived experience. With the human condition at its heart, the humanities foster our quest for better lives. Now, more than ever, the humanities hold a profound and meaningful place in the "heart of healthcare," helping increase understanding about the world of the provider, the patient, and the experience of illness. 🌸



***We would like to thank and recognize the award-winning national program, *Literature and Medicine*, for providing the inspiration and "Humanities at the Heart of Healthcare" tagline for this *Connections* program article.**

To learn more about the *Connections* program, please visit www.nhhumanities.org/Connections.

