



A new course
examines the
*Healer's
Art*

Learning not to forget

by M. Van Eyck

For the first time this academic year, University of Wisconsin Medical School offered first- and second-year students a formal elective course that examines the art of healing. In doing so, it joined 27 other medical schools around the country that have integrated this innovative course, designed by Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, clinical professor at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), into their curricula.

Response to the new offering was overwhelmingly positive. While students aren't required to take any electives—and they are notoriously busy with a grueling course load in their first two years—nearly 50 of them signed up for the Healer's Art, many more than administrators had expected.

To Jen Alt, a second-year student at UW Medical School and student advisor for the course, her peers' enthusiasm highlights a glaring gap in medical education. Even after the first month of medical school, she says, students already yearn to study the broader, humanistic aspects of care. While most courses teach students "how to give people drugs and alleviate symptoms," she explains, "the actual healing process is something people never really talk about."

Alt's own desire to more deeply explore the healing process led her a year ago to connect with Lucille Marchand, MD, UW Medical

School associate professor of family medicine, who was in the process of organizing the new course. With course director Marchand as her faculty mentor, Alt signed on to help with the organizing, making the work the focus of her LOCUS project (see related story on page 25).

Marchand, a family practice physician at UW Health Belleville Clinic, had attended medical school at UCSF before Remen introduced the course there. As a medical student, she sorely missed instruction that dealt with the healing art perspective of medicine. As a physician, she deeply appreciates this aspect of her work.

The Healer's Art course takes as its premise the belief that much of medicine has shut itself off from the emotional elements of healthcare. The clear corollary is that a disproportionate emphasis on technology and expertise has made for less rewarding work—and possibly less effective care. "If we're able to continue doing something



Medical student Jen Alt served as student advisor for the course.



The course encourages students to turn their focus inward.

[technical] for our patients, we feel good about ourselves,” explains Marchand. “But when we can’t do anything more, we often abandon them.”

Perhaps understandably, many physicians have learned to turn away from the emotional side of medicine, which can seem so complex and, in the face of death, inadequate. “Yet, this is often when patients need us the most,” Marchand says.

UW Medical School strives to touch on some of these issues in different ways. All students take Patient, Doctor, and Society, for example, a two-year-long course that exposes them to, among other things, social aspects of patient-centered care as well as communication and other clinical skills. Other programs, such

as LOCUS, also address social and ethical aspects of today’s healthcare system.

But the Healer’s Art course, above all, encourages students and faculty to turn their focus inward with the hope that by integrating their emotional depths with their technical expertise, physicians will apply their whole selves to healing others. The course is important, Marchand says, because doctors can forget this side of medicine early on in their careers, even though they may have entered medicine in search of its humanism—“wanting to make a difference, wanting to care.” One of the objectives of the course, she explains, is to help faculty members remember what initially drew them to medicine—and to teach students not to forget.

The course, which meets for five three-hour sessions a semester, is designed as a discovery model in which students and faculty members explore what the practice of medicine means to them. During one class, for example,

they compose and present their own Hippocratic oath based on what they want to accomplish in their practice. In other classes, they draw or work with imagery to remember times when they felt grief or awe—and either shared those experiences or felt isolated and detached. Both class lectures and faculty-led small group discussions then help students relate these personal experiences to the challenges that they will face as physicians.

While out-of-class work for the course involves little more than keeping a journal and reading Remen’s best-selling collection of essays, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal* (and even that is optional), the course demands a significant time commitment, especially from the faculty. In total, 10 faculty members—from such varied specialties as psychiatry, family medicine and rheumatology—signed up to serve as small-group leaders and deliver short, didactic talks with titles such as “Tools of Self-Remembering,” “What We Do Instead of

Healing” and “Mystery and Awe.”

Marchand says that, despite the commitment the course demands, the faculty brim with enthusiasm. “The faculty are at least as excited as the students,” she laughs. “They know there is much for them to remember.”

When faculty members talk about their own experiences of doctoring, she adds, they are given the opportunity to connect with their colleagues—sometimes for the first time—about the emotional aspects of their work. At the same time, by witnessing the faculty members explore and reclaim the human dimension of doctoring, students expand their sense of what it means to be a physician.



When Remen’s own early practice in pediatrics left her feeling depleted, she began to explore the ways in which she and other physicians derive meaning and reward from their work. What she found—and shared in her book—is



Nearly 50 students signed up for the new course, many more than were expected. Faculty members, such as Daniel Muller, MD, associate professor of medicine (right), were as excited as the students about the course. Previous page, left: Course director Lucille Marchand, MD.

that physicians feel more fulfilled at work when they feel more connected to themselves, to each other and, consequently, to the patients they treat.

Remen developed the Healer's Art, first offered to UCSF medical students 12 years ago, to prepare doctors for this challenge. The course has received high acclaim, including an article in last year's *U.S. News and World Report*, which featured it as an example of excellence in medical education.

Now a clinical professor of family and community medicine at UCSF and a practitioner who deals almost exclusively with end-of-life patients, Remen encourages physicians to be "whole human beings" in their practices. By witnessing, sharing and even grieving with patients, she says, doctors can use themselves—and not just their expertise and knowledge—as therapeutic agents. In turn, these deep connections can reward, rejuvenate and even heal both patient and physician.

David Rakel, MD, UW Medical School assistant professor of family medicine and director of the UW Health Integrative Medicine Program, believes that the Healer's Art can help students in the same way. "Sometimes we don't give enough attention to students' emotional side," says Rakel, the assistant course director. "And it's that side that is so important to health and healing."

Both Rakel and Marchand attended a training retreat offered through Remen's Institute for the Study of Health and Illness, which is designed to train course directors. More than a year before the UW course began, they met with course faculty once a month for a year to prepare for the course. Over pot-luck dinners at one another's homes, they took the course together, discussing their own stories of grief, uncertainty and mystery.

During those meetings and in the course itself, faculty are encouraged to listen deeply to each person's story and to refrain from offering counsel, even when that means sitting in the discomfort of their own powerlessness. "Just telling your story is healing," says Rakel. "Bringing it from the unconscious to the conscious allows you to have a sense of control and understanding."

He insists that connecting deeply with patients does not necessarily have to take more time. However, it does require



Students listened intently during a session on mystery and awe.

going "to a patient's bedside with the intent of really being present," he says.

Patients often have a sense of what they need in order to heal, he continues, but they need to be heard first.

"Humans don't generally make behavioral shifts if we just tell them the evidence," he says. "They make that shift if we connect deeply with them in some emotional way."

It can be hard to see the importance of approaches that are not analytical, observes Rakel. Yet, human connections are "particularly important for those diseases that we don't fix well with drugs or surgeries," he says. Moreover, with a rise in less "fixable" illnesses, such as chronic pain, metabolic syndromes and multifactorial autoimmune



The Healer's Art course helps students pay attention to the human dimensions of medicine, which are so important to health and healing, according to David Rakel, MD, director of the UW Health Integrative Medicine Program.

diseases, he says, studying the art of healing has become all the more essential.

In the end, courses like the Healer's Art are not only changing the face of medical education, but also the practice of medicine itself. "We have 48 students who are going to be doctors," says Marchand. "They're going to be a little different from other physicians. But they're going to be different in a way that may be very healing for other people to be around."

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An integral community

This year's Healer's Art course was supported by the following outside donors:

South East Area Health Education Center, with a grant of \$4,500.

Rachel Remen's **Institute for the Study of Health and Illness**, a \$1,000 gift raised by an anonymous donor.

RSVP of Dane County, a University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics volunteer group that sewed fabric hearts for course participants to carry in their coat pockets. The volunteers so enjoyed the task that they already are taking orders for next year.

Wisconsin Psychiatric Institute and Clinics (Department of Psychiatry) donated the course meeting room.

Readers interested in learning more about the course, or supporting it in any way, can contact course director Lu Marchand, MD, at (608) 424-3384 (lmarchan@fammed.wisc.edu) or assistant course director David Rakel, MD, 845-9531 (drakel@fammed.wisc.edu).