

Narrative Medicine in the Time of Pandemics: A Brief Course for Third-Year Medical Students

To the Editor: In March 2020, as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases increased in the United States, the Association of American Medical Colleges recommended that medical students not participate in direct patient contact because of concerns about their safety.¹ There were particularly marked effects on clinical rotations, which were quickly reconfigured to enable students to continue their medical education while adhering to the Association of American Medical Colleges' recommendations of avoiding in-person patient care.

Through telling and listening to stories, Narrative Medicine, a field developed by Rita Charon, provides opportunities for developing a practice of medicine that promotes empathy, reflection, and resilience.² Although Narrative Medicine is embedded in the delivery of patient care, it is fundamentally structured outside of the patient visit; therefore, a course on Narrative Medicine presented an opportunity for students to practice the skill of reflection while processing individual and collective experiences early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The spring of 2020 was challenging for third-year medical students at the Florida International University Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine; clinical rotations were scheduled to begin in early April and then delayed indefinitely because of COVID-19. As such, faculty developed coursework, including Narrative Medicine in the Time of Pandemics, for students to complete while awaiting the start of their clerkships.

The goal of this 1-week course, implemented in April 2020, was to provide third-year students with the opportunity to practice Narrative Medicine by writing about their COVID-19 experiences and reading and discussing Albert Camus' *The Plague*.³ Students wrote a 1000-word essay about their COVID-19 experiences,

received feedback on their writing, and submitted a revised paper. In addition, students identified meaningful passages in *The Plague*, wrote discussion questions, and participated in a faculty-facilitated small group about the book.

Two weeks following the course, the 22 students who participated were surveyed regarding their experiences; 16 (73%) provided responses. Likert-type responses were compiled using descriptive statistics. The short-answer questions were evaluated for themes by two coders, who agreed upon the final list through an iterative process. Institutional review board exemption was granted.

Ninety-four percent of students believed that the objectives of the course were clear, that there were an appropriate number of assignments, that the feedback they received on their writing allowed for deeper reflections on COVID-19, that the small-group discussion allowed for a deeper understanding of *The Plague*, and that *The Plague* served as an effective way to explore their current experiences with COVID-19. One student strongly disagreed with all of the statements.

Students noted that their favorite part of the course was the writing assignment (n = 4) and the small-group discussion (n = 8). Seven students had no suggestions for improvements, two stated that they would have liked more time to read, one would have liked a longer course, and another wanted to hear more about classmates' COVID-19 experiences. Students identified multiple parallel themes between COVID-19 and *The Plague*, including the isolation of quarantine (n = 3), the non-medical public's attitude toward the pandemic (n = 3), the uncertainty of the future (n = 2), and multiple nonspecific similarities (n = 3).

In conclusion, all of the students but one reported a high level of satisfaction with the curriculum. Students believed that Albert Camus' *The Plague* effectively facilitated their examination of COVID-19 and were able to articulate at least one parallel theme between the book and their own experiences. The one dissenting student did not provide comments to further elucidate this dissatisfaction.

The 1-week format of our curriculum is both a strength and a weakness. Given the succinct nature of the course, it included only two assignments, which means that students may not have had the time to delve deeply into the presented concepts. Its short format, however, means that it is adaptable to different curricular needs; we have used two longer versions of this course, with additional assignments. When clinical rotations resumed, these narrative medicine courses enabled students to continue their curricular progress, even if quarantining.

In a clinical curriculum still affected by COVID-19, we will use this 1-week course, as needed, to ensure that students continue to move their education forward in meaningful ways. Given its relevance and potential impact, even once COVID-19 is no longer directly influencing our curriculum, we will integrate Albert Camus' *The Plague* into our Narrative Medicine elective.

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