

This road - no one goes down it - autumn evenings. Basho

My Narrow Road Through Deep Cyber-Medicine*
by David J. Elpern

Abstract: This essay describes a 25-year medical odyssey through the universe of cyberspace. It chronicles the author's adventures with teledermatology, the medical humanities and the online medical literature. These explorations continue, but the author does not know the next ports-of-call; He can he only "hope the voyage is a long one,/full of adventure, full of discovery."

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Forty years ago, when I decided to make dermatology my life's work, the specialty was a far cry from what it has become. It was not then what I call and ODEAR specialty². By this I mean a life-style profession. Residencies in the ODEAR specialties (ophthalmology, dermatology, ER, anesthesia, radiology) are the most highly coveted by medical students today because of the perception that they allow one to have a life aside from medicine while still making a very good living.

Dermatology, like most medical practices, has metamorphosed over the past 20 years from a pedestrian activity into something that my friend, Dr. Pierre Morceau Dubois (pseudonym) calls "minimally effective cosmetic and laser dermatology."³ We have become, or are expected by our patients to be, experts in wrinkles, rhytides, jowls, lentigines: in short, many dermatologists seem to focus, these days, on the minor skin concerns of the rich and narcissistic. In my entire training, the word "rhytide" was never uttered. You may ask, "What is the difference between a rhytide and wrinkle?" The difference, appreciated only by minimally-effective cosmetic dermatologists and plastic surgeons, is around \$500.

Of course, there is Medical Dermatology Society that is composed of serious, somewhat humorless folk.⁴ But it doesn't seem like they have as much fun as we did when we practiced "old-style" dermatology. The "medical dermatologists" are the self-anointed keepers of the academic, scientific flame. What I will address here is the narrow path I have taken exploring the cyber-recesses of the humanities and dermatology and how this conjunction has become a hobby (some might say a "monomania") of mine.

Francis W. Peabody was a physician who appreciated both the art and the science of medicine. In an essay entitled, "The Patient and the Man" he wrote:

The proper employment of the fundamental sciences in the study of disease has become an essential for a good medical practice, but over and above this, there must be something which

*correlates the scientific findings with the actual problems of the individual case – the art of medicine, which carries us beyond the patient to the man.*⁵

There is a similar quote, often attributed erroneously to Osler, that goes: "It is often more important to treat the patient who has the disease than it is to treat the disease the patient has."

As I followed these narrow paths, trying to focus on “the patient with the disease” they led me down uncharted byways. What follows is an account of some of the avenues I have wandered along.

Sixteen years ago, I met the Malaysian dermatologist, Henry Foong, and together we formulated an idea to start an international grand rounds of dermatology. To establish this, we hired a Williams student, Dean Loochomvorapongse, and a high school senior, Erlend Johnson, to build a website. VGRD.org was launched in the fall of 2000 and it showed Henry and me the power of the web as a platform to explore our clinical and humanitarian interests.⁶ This led over the next few years to a number of websites and blogs that are platforms for our growing appreciation of the importance of the humanities in our daily clinical practice, and indeed in our social interactions and private lives.

VGRD’s driving concept is professional collaboration as described by the 16th century poet/position John Halle:

When thou arte callde at anye time,
A patient to see:
And dost perceave the cure to grate,
And ponderous for thee:

See that thou laye disdeyne aside,
And pryde of thyne own skylle:
And think no shame counsell to take,
But rather wyth good wyll

Get one or two of experte men,
To helpe thee in that neede;
To make them partakers wyth thee
In that work to procede....⁷

In 2005, some colleagues and I started a website called Cell 2 Soul.⁸ C2S was initially an online journal but after a short while it became clear that it was too difficult, and expensive, to deal with a

webmaster; so we converted it into the C2S blog.⁹ This was the similar course taken with VGRD. Presently on C2S we have about 1150 entries. The philosophy behind C2S is to celebrate and explore the many meanings of health and "dis-ease." It draws on the arts, social sciences and the biological sciences. Rather than being an "expert system," it is designed to be a locus where professionals, patients and their families can meet on a level playing field. The C2S blog provides us with an opportunity to learn from each other as well as to instruct. Chaucer stated it well when he described the student: "and gladly would he learne and gladly teche."

While there are countless medical journals globally, even some devoted to the medically humanities, C2S is one of the first designed for both the laity as well as professional readers.

As physicians, it is clear to me that we doctors spend a lot more time thinking about the disease the patient has than about the man, woman or child who sits or lies across from us. Books, film, poetry and other art forms provide opportunities to learn about the human side of illness. This is of vital importance when dealing with "poor suffering humanity" who consults us.

As I contemplated this, I had the idea to start the next two blogs:

1. A pathography is a narrative that gives voice and face to the illness experience. It puts the person with the disease in the forefront and, as such, it is an important learning opportunity for all caregivers and fellow sufferers. The Pathography blog, established in 2008, is a repository for these stories.¹⁰ Pathographies provide ways of learning to focus on, and perhaps vicariously understand, a bit of the illness experience from the first person standpoint. Too often, in our medical literature, the voice of the patient is not heard. This blog is a place where I have indexed and described works, mostly books, that touch on diverse aspects of the illness experience.

Freud wrote: *Wherever I go, a poet has been there first.*

Kafka stunned us with: *A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us.*

The poet Tracy K. Smith tells us: *I wanted to write the kind of poetry that people read and remembered, that they lived by — the kinds of lines that I carried with me from moment to moment on a given day without even having chosen to.*

In this vein, when I am doing a surgery, I often think of Emily Dickenson's prescient, haiku-like:
*"Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife.
Underneath their fine incisions
Lies the culprit – Life!"*

B. Similarly, film provides another opportunity to learn about the illness experience. Shortly after starting the Pathography blog I had the idea for MedFlix.¹¹ MedFlix is to film what Pathography is to literature and narrative. It provides helpful instructional tools and is a resource for those who wish to learn about the depiction of maladies in creative films and documentaries. Presently, MedFlix includes films that address over 200 health and disease-related subjects from Abortion to Women in Medicine.

While meandering along these lonely, lovely cyber-pathways it struck me how our major medical journals make it difficult to publish articles on the human side of medicine. I have tried a few times. Since I knew the editors of these journals sometimes they humored me. The articles they finally published were chopped up and abbreviated and by the time they appeared in print they were not something I was proud to own. They recalled me of the old saw "a camel is a horse designed by a committee" (or an editorial board).

So, in 2012, with the help of Inez Tan, another bright student, I launched an online periodical called The Online Journal of Community and Patient-Centered Dermatology ([OJCPCD](#)).¹² This serves as a home for articles that are not likely to be accepted by the Archives of Dermatology, the JAAD, the British Journal of Dermatology, the International Journal of Dermatology or other "prestigious" periodicals. OJCPCD does not utilize peer-review, which is just another roadblock to prevent the publication of the personal type of articles I am talking about. Rather, we rely on post-publication peer review as defined by Richard Smith.¹³

For a busy clinician or layperson submitting a piece to a major medical journal is often a time-sink. Why waste one's time when the OJCPCD is there? With the proper use of meta-tags (keywords) one's article can be found with a Google search.

Over the past two and a half years we have published a few articles a month in the OJCPCD. One of the most recent is an article entitled "The Right Stuff: Tiffany Rocks."¹⁴ Written by P.M. DuBois, M.D, Ph.D (pseudonym) it describes the type of person who is a successful millennial applicant for a dermatology residency. The author focuses on what she considers a trend in skin practitioners towards focusing on minimally effective cosmetic and laser dermatology. The practitioners of this mercantile pseudoscience are legion and are legends in their own minds. I don't think that the conventional dermatology journal would ever consider this article for publication. If you have a chance, please read it and give us your "post-publication peer review."

It has been an entertaining and stimulating journey down the cyber-byways of the humanities and medicine/dermatology. Even today, I'm not sure where this path is leading. I feel a kinship with Matsuo Basho, the great 17th century haiku poet who described "The Narrow Way."

The days and months are travelers of eternity. So too are the years that come and go. For those who passed their lives afloat on boats or faced old age leaving horses tied by the bridal, their journey is life, their journey is home and many are the men of old who met their end upon the road.

How long ago, I wonder, did I see a drift of cloud born away upon the wind and ceaseless dreams of wondering become aroused?

The spirits of the road entered me, and I could not concentrate on anything. So I patched up my trousers, put new chords in my straw hat and strengthened my knees with moxa. A vision of the moon was already in my mind. I sold my hut and wrote this just before moving to Sempu's cottage.¹⁵

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