

Creative writing may make doctors better

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By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Some doctors might improve their bedside manner by honing their creative writing skills, a small study suggests.

Yale University researchers found that medical residents who completed a creative writing workshop felt the experience helped them better view their patients as people, and not just medical cases.

The effect, according to the researchers, seems to stem from the fact that the residents not only reflected on their own emotions and the experiences of their patients, but also wrote it down as a story.

Many residency programs have support groups where young doctors can discuss their concerns, lead study author Dr. Anna Reisman noted in an interview. However, the process of writing a narrative may help residents examine their experiences in a more thoughtful way, according to Reisman, an assistant professor of internal medicine at the Yale School of Medicine.

"Focusing on the craft of writing, in other words, provides a means of increasing one's powers of observation and improving one's understanding of both self and others," she and her colleagues write in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

Their study included 15 residents at Yale-New Haven Medical Center who took part in a 2.5-day writing workshop with well-known doctor/author Abraham Verghese.

No residency program had ever offered a creative writing course before, Reisman noted, and "no one knew what to expect."

In focus groups held after the workshop, residents said that writing helped them process their own emotions and better understand those of their patients. Their stories' themes included their own insecurity and feelings of powerlessness, breaking bad news, burnout and awareness of "how little physicians know their patients." In the focus groups, Reisman's team notes, one resident said, "I didn't realize some of the emotions I was feeling until writing it down." Another said, "The act of writing changes the way you look at patients."

One of the goals in starting the writing workshop, Reisman said, was to help residents "cultivate a curiosity about patients beyond their disease."

Though the study couldn't assess whether the workshop changed participants' medical practice, one of the hopes, Reisman said, is that it will help them better communicate with patients.

"Ultimately, the hope is to make them better doctors," she said.

SOURCE: Journal of General Internal Medicine, October 2006.