

Editorial

Medical Humanities in the Middle East Conference

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Doha, Qatar

Authors

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Editorial

This special issue of IGHPPE gathers together extended abstracts of papers and posters presented at the 1st International Conference on the Medical Humanities in the Middle East held in Doha, Qatar on November 17-18, 2019. The two-day conference attracted 46 clinical practitioners, medical ethicists, humanities scholars, and other experts from the Middle East, Europe, the United States, and Qatar. Organized by Dr. Alan S. Weber, Dr. Mohamud A. Verjee, and Ms. Jamie Gray of Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar, this academic meeting aimed to explore the full richness of the interplay among illness, health and medicine, and the arts and humanities. The discussions included how the diverse cultures, languages, and world views of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region inspire culturally-relevant responses to the experiences of illness, suffering, and disease for society, individuals, healthcare practitioners, and healthcare systems.

The editors believe that this conference was the first of its kind in the Middle East wholly devoted to medical and healthcare humanities, providing an overview of the diverse work in healthcare communication, bioethics, history of medicine, medical sociology, narrative medicine, medicine and literature, and expressive art therapies being carried out in the MENA region.

To develop more humanistic-oriented physicians, and to understand better the human dimension of disease, the emerging field of medical humanities (or healthcare humanities, as some prefer) is increasingly integrated into international medical education. These interdisciplinary efforts attempt to address the sociological, economic, philosophical, and ethical issues that doctors, patients, families, and society at large must face. They go beyond the more technical aspects of medicine such as diagnosis, prognosis, and therapeutics. A growing evidence base indicates that humanistic approaches to healthcare improve patient outcomes, contribute to better compliance, better provider-patient relations, and reduce medical error and liability. Also, Expressive Arts Therapies, such

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as Music, Art, Narrative, and Play Therapies, use the arts themselves as a healing practice.

According to Rabie E. Abdel-Halim and Khaled M. AlKattan of Alfaisal and King Saud Universities in Riyadh, "it is very crucial to strike a harmonious balance between the two major branches of knowledge; namely, natural sciences and technology in one hand, and social sciences and humanities in the other. The importance of striking such a balance is increasingly felt to match with the growing detrimental effects of the already well-established and strong-rooted materialism. We have to be able to produce not only [medical] graduates with great mental and intellectual capability but also with strong emotional and spiritual stability." Currently, many of the medical humanities curricula and initiatives in the region appear based on best Western practices. More discussions are needed to imagine what patient-centered health systems might look like in Muslim-majority countries in which religion and traditional values play such a key role. History demonstrates that medical practice and the arts were intertwined in Islamic approaches to health in the Golden Age of Islamic science. Ibn Sina and Al Jawziyya, for example, believed that musical rhythms affected both the soul and body. Al Farabi recommended musical training both to diagnose disease via the cardiac pulse (sphygmology), and to cure illness by harmonizing discordances of the soul (nafs), what today we would call "music therapy."

Although modern biomedicine has emphasized the universality of human physiology, and standardization of medical practices and protocols, unique cultural considerations arise in delivering culturally-competent and patient-centered care. Besides, we now know that different regions of the world and racial subgroups have different genetic makeups (as well as environments and diets), that cause regional variations in the burdens of disease. As Halil Tekiner of Erciyes University School of Pharmacy in Kayseri, Turkey argues, concepts "such as autonomy and truth telling may clash with non-Western cultural mores; and attitudes toward end-of-life care, abortion, and genetic engineering may differ across cultures.... incorporating local experiences in medical humanities courses will also help students to recognize and appropriately address some culture-specific bias that occurs in health care delivery in their own countries."

The three keynote speakers, Professor Mohammed Ghaly (bioethicist at Hamad Bin Khalifa University), Arthur Frank (medical sociologist and pioneer of the Narrative Medicine field), and Ala Bashir (Iraqi surgeon and internationally acclaimed artist) provided three very different perspectives on the cross-disciplinary field of the medical humanities. Ghaly analyzed the "The Various Faces of Genomics: Islamic Bioethical Deliberations," exploring how Islamic sharia law and *fiqh* struggled (through *ijtihad*, or reasoned argument) with emerging issues of genomics in the 1990s in response to the Human Genome Project and the first successful cloning of a mammal, Dolly the Sheep, in 1997. Muftis, Imams, Sheikhs and scientists from the Organization of Islamic Sciences (IOMS) in Kuwait, the Islamic Fiqh Academy (IFA) and International Islamic Fiqh Academy (IIFA) in Saudi Arabia convened at several international meetings during an intense period of discussions circa 1993-2013, during which, according to Ghaly, two 'faces' emerged: a 'suspicious face' (genomics is 'playing God' and could lead to a biological catastrophe) and a 'promising face' (genomics could lead to better health, and Islam stresses the search-for-knowledge).

Several other related papers stressed the complexity of different bioethical questions in Muslim-majority nations which have arisen from contemporary health challenges such as HIV/AIDS and new technologies such as gene sequencing. Alya Al Shakaki, Clinical Research Coordinator at Weill Cornell Medicine – Qatar, presented the ethical dilemmas in reporting Incidental Findings (IF) to patients and related family members (who may share the same deleterious alleles) in her paper on "Islamic Bioethical Discourse in Incidental Findings: Research Genetic Context." While researching liver disease, her team uncovered another gene for deafness both in the patient and related family members: the questions that arose were what to disclose, and to whom and by whom. After debate and consulting religious experts and existing international protocols, the group employed disclosure criteria of "analytical/clinical validity, clinical actionability, which is known as clinical utility, how serious the condition is, the participant desire, and the effect on the offspring."

An occupational health group from Qatargas detailed other critical medical ethical issues in

patient confidentiality, conflicts of interest, and physician advocacy in patient care in industrial settings in Qatar. Dr. Osama Ibrahim, founder of the Qatargas medical department, Dr. Walid Hassanen, Doctor in Charge for Plant and Offshore, and Dr. Syed Zaffarullah Hussaini, Occupational Health Physician, lectured on the "Ethics of occupational medicine in Qatargas." Occupational health ethics is particularly complex due to competing, and sometimes conflicting interests of the patient, employer, and employee. Dr. Ibrahim and his group emphasized that "for most of the challenges and conflicts there is no single correct solution and the doctor has to decide the best possible solution." Gamze Şenyürek, a graduate of the History of Science Program of Istanbul University Faculty of Humanities who is completing her Bioethics Masters Program at Acibadem Mehmet Ali Aydınlar University in Istanbul, presented groundbreaking research on persons with HIV/AIDS in her contribution "Confidentiality, Partner Notification and Ethical Issues: A Qualitative Research on People Living with HIV in Istanbul." Her research highlighted not only the epidemiological threats of this disease but also the "risk for public health, as well as the infringement of human rights and right to health," due to the stigmatization of patients and inadequate counseling and support.

The second keynote speaker Dr. Arthur W. Frank is a retired medical sociologist at the University of Calgary, Canada and currently a Professor at VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway. He is a pioneer of the Narrative Medicine movement, and spoke to the meeting on "Witnessing Illness: The Voices That Accompany Me." In the talk, Dr. Frank provided a typology of work done in healthcare humanities and emphasized "the injunction to keep the stories in the foreground, the work of amplifying and connecting stories, and the need for generous interpretation." He spoke in depth about three specific story writers who have impacted his work: Audre Lorde, Reynolds Price, and Stewart Alsop. Frank also addressed an often avoided topic of "Talking about Illness: Why it is Difficult and Why it is Valuable" at a related talk to a capacity audience at the Qatar National Library on November 19, 2019, co-sponsored by the Qatar Cancer Society. Frank drew on his memoir of surviving cancer, *At the Will of the Body* (1991), as well as his scholarly work in narratology, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-narratology* (2010). In non-

technical language, Frank introduced the power of stories for self-discovery and promoting listening, dispelling patient isolation and alienation (creating a dialogue between one's self and body) and facilitating the "witnessing" of illness.

Ayesha Ahmad serves as a lecturer in Global Health at St George's Hospital, University of London, and at the Institute for Global Health, University College London. She co-directs The SHAER Project - "Story-telling for Health: Acknowledgement, Expression, and Recovery," with collaborators in Iraq, Kashmir, Turkey, Afghanistan, South Africa, and Tunisia. Ahmad reported her research on the use of narrative in trauma recovery in non-clinical settings. In her paper "Story-telling in Trauma Therapy in Contexts of War and Gender-Based Violence," she argued that "narrative is also an important part of the therapeutic process for trauma recovery. However, very little has been done to explore alternative discourses of disclosure in the context of trauma therapy, which relies heavily on a prescribed biomedical framework of narrative, or most specifically, a reconstructed narrative."

A graduate of the University of Canterbury, Dr. Shahd Alshammari teaches Literature, Disability, and Gender studies, with a research interest in madness in literature, at the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) in Kuwait City, Kuwait. In her presentation, "Narrating Arab Women's Voices and Disability: 'Notes on the Flesh,' a biomythography," she introduced other scholars to her semi-fictional work, *Notes on the Flesh* (2017), the first Arab female voice in English to describe the experience of being disabled with a neurological disorder in the Gulf region. Although these kind of pathographies are common in other countries, there are very few first-person illness narratives originating in the Arab-speaking world. Adding to the literary contributions to the conference, Sandra Matissek, who holds degrees in British Studies, Public law and Criminology from the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, presented her analytical research on "Brontë's Work Relating to Sufism," tying together Emily Brontë's characters and Sufi mysticism.

The third keynote speaker, Dr. Ala Bashir, exemplified how the arts and medicine can mutually reinforce one another. As Iraq's top plastic surgeon, forced

to collaborate with the Saddam Hussein regime, recorded in his 2005 book, *The Insider: Trapped in Saddam's Brutal Regime*, Bashir is also an internationally-acclaimed painter and sculptor whose works have toured exhibitions in Baghdad, Belgrade, Bonn, Cairo, Doha, Dublin, London, Moscow, New Delhi, Paris, Rabat, Rome, Tunis, and Vienna. After fifty years of clinical experience, Dr. Bashir's paper "The Pursuit of balance" gives a sobering view of the decline of the doctor-patient relationship and the rise of economic interests in the provision of medical care. He argued for a return to fundamental human values in medicine which are being threatened by commercialism and finance, with managed care organizations who prioritize efficiency and profit over patient well-being.

Dr. Mohamud Verjee of Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar, similarly, provided his insights on the patient consultation from over thirty years of experience as a practicing physician. Dr. Verjee, a family physician, is an Associate Professor of Family Medicine, and the Assistant Dean for Medical Student Affairs at WCM-Q. Stressing the development of reflective and listening capacity among clinicians, Verjee echoed some of Dr. Bashir's concerns about the dangers of the erosion of trust and empathy that physicians and patients develop in a healthy and productive encounter. Verjee noted "Have we, as doctors, compressed time with patients into an efficiency role so that we may risk not having a genuinely productive conversation with our patients? If so, is this the right path to follow in the future? How much time needs to be allocated to complete the interaction and is it flexible, if more time is needed, for both the patient and the doctor?"

The presentation of Dr. Angie Cucchi provided quantitative research support for Dr. Verjee's and Dr. Bashir's insights about the vital role that the emotional dimensions of communication in the clinical encounter play in successful patient outcomes. She pointed out that previous research has indicated that "communication skills are not well taught as part of medical schools' curricula in the Middle East." Her investigations with Al Hemiary et al. on Iraqi physicians indicated that this group "might be naturally inclined to pay attention to interpersonal dynamics and communication that keeps emotional states at its core."

Sociological perspectives on the health sciences and the medical profession also emerged as a prominent theme at the conference with three papers on this topic. Adam Larson's "A View from the Cuckoo's Nest: The Value of Teaching Sociology in Medical School," argued that sociology helps healthcare workers understand the forces that shape their professional practice and working conditions. Dr. Faten Hussein, of King's College London, joined the meeting via live video link from Egypt, and similar to Larson, argued that socio-economic perspectives could elucidate the intermediary role that Middle Eastern physicians navigate between a biomedical model of disease and the holistic orientation of Arab societies toward illness which views disease "as both psychosocial and physical maladaptation." Her presentation "Doctors as Mediators Between Two Worlds: Biomedicine and Socioeconomic realities in Arab Societies (A reading through literary texts)" employed literary texts in Arabic as evidence for her claims. The contribution "Doctors With Borders: The White Helmets and Radical Political Medicine," which also adopted methodologies from sociology and political philosophy, was presented by Saljooq Asif, an Associate Faculty member in the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, and Soubhana Asif, a master's student in the Medical Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Practice program at Boston University School of Medicine. Their paper critiqued colonial and political forces at play in both local humanitarian groups such as the Syria Civil Defense ("White Helmets"), and international NGOs such as *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) who are carrying out emergency medical care and evacuations during the Syrian Civil War.

Two historical papers by Georges Haddad, Clinical Associate Professor of Neurosurgery at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, and Sumayya Ahmed (not included in this collection), Lecturer in Library and Information Studies at University College London - Qatar, complemented the sociological contributions. Haddad's research, in his talk "Anatomy of Melancholia: An Arabic take on an English Classic," uncovered the important contributions that Arab scientists such as al-Rhazi, Ibn 'Imrān, Al-Majūsī, and Ibn Sīnā made to Robert Burton's classic text on the Renaissance disease called melancholy. Today, we would define the true condition as clinical depression, although

Burton additionally association the disease with intellectual inspiration and genius. Ahmed's talk entitled "From the Archives of Pre-colonial Medicine: An 1832 Moroccan Medical Diploma," analyzed the 1832 medical diploma of Mohammed ben Ahmed al Kahhak issued in Fez, Morocco. This detailed document presents a window on indigenous medical practice in colonial Morocco.

Professor Mary Ann Rishel earlier taught literature and medical humanities at Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar for many years, as well as founding the Writing Program. In her talk "The Great Medical Questions—And Beyond: A Medical-Humanities Curriculum," she presented a comprehensive medical humanities course curriculum and argued for the centrality of humanistic modes of thought for physicians-in-training. Dr. Tsai Pi-Hua, Director of the Center of Holistic Education of Mackay Medical College, Taipei, Taiwan submitted a poster, "Preparing medical students for the writing of the history of present illness: Marching from short story reading and the practice of visual art." It demonstrated how training in a close reading of such literary works as "A Rose for Emily" by novelist William Faulkner could translate to clinical skills such as close "readings" of patient symptoms. Her work is related to research that suggests that Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) developed through visual art education workshops can improve medical students' diagnostic accuracy.


A set of papers from two art therapists from Dubai and a poster from the UK revealed the growing use of the arts as accepted psychiatric interventions in the Gulf region and internationally. Sara Powell, MAAT (AThR), founded ATIC Psychological & Counselling Center in Dubai to provide Psychotherapy – with a specialization in Expressive Therapies – to the Gulf region. Natalia Gómez-Carlier, MAAT, is an ATR-BC Psychologist working at ATIC. She is the founder of the Colombian Art Therapy Association. In their first presentation, Powell and Gómez-Carlier explored the use of art therapy in healing "unprocessed grief, the depletion of internal and external resources as they take care of others" experienced by "Doctors, nurses, hospital staff and families." In their second group presentation entitled, "A Reflective Space: supporting local and expatriate patients, developing culturally sensitive mental health practices," they

advanced a culturally sensitive model of care. It factored in Muslim views of psychotherapeutic interventions and large expatriate populations of Dubai, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait, not possessing family support systems or those who bring different cultural and religious beliefs to their host country.

Linda Miller contributed a poster on using graphic medicine in a workshop setting to combat depression, burnout, dependence, divorce, and suicide and promote health and well-being among healthcare workers. After training in graphic methods and story-telling, workshop participants draw a "Sparkling Moment," critiqued through positive feedback techniques. In contrast to some other resilience building methodologies, "Sparkling Moments," accentuates the positive aspects of physician performances instead of mistakes, failure, and deficits. Dr. Miller is a London General Practitioner and Fellow of the RCGP. She holds the Diploma in Coaching Supervision from the Coach Supervision Academy and completed a master's degree in Medical Humanities at King's College London in 2015.

Psychiatrists at Hamad Medical Corporation contributed two papers on the Zar (Bori) cult based on spirit possession originating in Sudan, Ethiopia, and West Africa, and practiced throughout the Gulf in non-public spaces. Dr. Abdalla A.B. Khairi and Aisha A. Abdelkareem carried out a systematic review of the scientific evidence for spirit possession and only located ten valid and reliable studies, of which only four (40%) used controls. This finding indicated that the scientific community does not thoroughly understand this actual and culturally accepted practice as a psychological phenomenon. However, Nahid M. Elhassan, Ahmed Al Safi, and Abdalla A. B. Khairi in their related paper "The Zar (Bori) Cult: A Proposed Integrated Psychotherapy Module" are investigating how "effective cross-cultural diagnostic, psychoanalytic and therapeutic tools in Zar and similar cults arise. The project also verifies whether Zar achieves a total cure, partial treatment, alleviates symptoms or only relieves tension."

Cherif Mohamed Amor's work represents the small but growing number of studies using the hypothetico-deductive method, controlled trials and maturing technologies such as fMRI, in an attempt



to quantify the previously difficult to understand, and dismissed as subjective, aesthetic preferences of humans for particular environments, namely colors. Amor, an expert in Environmental Design and Chair of the Department of Interior Design at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, described his research on lighting preferences among ADHD subjects in his talk "Impact of Fluorescent Color Temperature on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) Subjects: An fMRI Study." His work has a significant potential impact on reducing stress and promoting wellness in interior environments, including hospitals, schools, and factories for both the mentally-challenged and the neurotypical.

The 1st International Conference on the Medical Humanities in the Middle East created a much-needed dialogue among a diverse range of fields invested in the humanities as a healing practice, a core component of best practices clinical care and medical education, and as a means of exploring the human condition. Participants unanimously agreed that further explorations should be encouraged in the MENA region to investigate the interplay among religion, culture, and health, impacting medical experiences in myriad ways. They included medical ethics, culturally-bound conceptions of autonomy, medical futility, abortion, palliative care, patient care, social perceptions of disease origins, philosophies of wellness, shared decision making, and the differing interpretations of abnormal mental states.

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About the authors

Dr. Alan S. Weber, PhD, has taught the Medical Humanities—including the history, philosophy and sociology of medicine and Islamic Medical Ethics—through writing intensive courses at Weill Cornell Medicine–Qatar for the past thirteen years. He is the author of a widely used textbook on the history of science and medicine, *19th Century Science* (2000). He has directed a number of narrative medicine and medical humanities projects in Qatar at the national and institutional level including a nationally-distributed public brochure on Health Website Reliability, a booklet of patient education cancer survivor stories for the Qatar Cancer Society, a QNRF-funded research project on Literature and Medicine, five volumes of medical student essay writing, and the first cross-disciplinary Art-Medicine undergraduate course in the Arabian Gulf (with Stephen Scott, M.D.). He conducted an interventional educational trial on the use of graphic novels in medical ethics teaching in 2015. He has organized and Co-Directed seven ACCME-accredited workshops on the medical humanities at WCM-Q.

Qualifying from the University of Dundee, Scotland, UK, Dr. Mohamud Verjee was a general practitioner in Oxford until 1994 before moving to Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Appointed the Clerkship Director for Family Medicine at the University of Calgary, Alberta in 2003, he joined Weill Cornell Medicine - Qatar in 2007 to set up the Primary Care Clerkship. A practicing physician, faculty member, teacher, educator, researcher, writer, motivational speaker, and multiple award recipient, his academic fields of interest are widespread. They include disruptive innovation in learning, exploring the metaphorical spaces of narrative medicine, and teaching empathy to students. An alum of the Harvard Macy Institute in Boston since 2009, he completed his MBA in Leadership & Sustainability in 2015. He was accorded Fellowship of the College of Family Physicians of Canada in 2014 and selected as a Senior Fellow in mental health research in 2017, at Clare College, Cambridge University, England. He holds the post of Assistant Dean, Medical Student Affairs, as well as a Co-Director of the Family Medicine Clerkship. Dr. Verjee started to play the violin over two years ago and added a cello to his repertoire last year. He continues to play squash, albeit in a more leisurely way than earlier at Dundee.