

Perspective

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As a baccalaureate student at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, I studied the relationship between women and literature/medicine and participated in summer research that gave me a first-hand account of nineteenth-century medicine. My honors thesis was entitled: “Fiction + History = Healthcare Reformation: Tracking Social Perceptions of Mental Illness and its Influence on the Quality of Psychiatric Nursing Care from 170-1918.” At the time, I knew I truly enjoyed this type of work. Three years later, now a psychiatric nurse working toward a psychiatric nurse practitioner degree, I attribute my undergraduate experience to framing my professional career. My health humanities education has taught me the importance of viewing situations holistically. As a psychiatric provider, this thought process is crucial to providing the best quality of care through a holistic, empathetic approach.

Patients are admitted to an inpatient psychiatric unit in their most vulnerable state. As a staff nurse, this means ensuring that patients takes their medications, knows what their medication is and why they are taking it, is appropriately attending to personal hygiene, are socializing appropriately with peers in the therapeutic milieu, and are eating and drinking enough. These may seem like simple tasks but, more often than not, I meet resistance. My approach to this resistance is derived from both my clinical knowledge and humanities training. More specifically, my clinical knowledge gives me insight about my patients’ behaviors but what catalyzes this critical thinking process and enhances my appreciation for the meaning behind patients’ initial presentation, is my humanities training.

For example, a patient may be struggling with his or her ability to regulate emotions. Therefore, the patient may be social in the therapeutic milieu, but she is also instigating verbal and/or physical altercations. It requires an understanding of the pathologic components of her thought processes—how these were originally developed and how they continue to manifest in her current life—to successfully interact with this type of patient. A similar mindset is also required when studying literature, especially when identifying metaphors within a work of fiction that relate to the historical context of the time period. My honors thesis work gave me

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an appreciation for how the environmental factors within an author's life influenced what she wrote about and, more importantly, how these factors influenced the meaning of the text. Therefore, in nursing, I am able to appreciate how patients' environmental factors influence how they figuratively write their own story. An understanding of what has and is currently influencing a patient in his or her life helps me empathize with him or her. Without my health humanities education, I would be missing critical skills that will allow me to reach my full potential as a future nurse practitioner.

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