UC SANTA BARBARA

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Doctor's Orders

The poet William Carlos Williams also was a pediatrician, wont to craft poems on prescription pads and known to credit medicine as “the very thing that made it possible for me to write.” Characterizing his two passions as inextricably linked, he noted in his 1967 autobiography that “*they are two parts of a whole, that it is not two jobs at all, that one rests the man when the other fatigues him.*”

The indelible connection between the scientific and humanistic — and the benefits that the humanities pursuits can bring to the practice of medicine specifically — are at the heart of a new program at UC Santa Barbara.

With the start of the new academic year the university is launching a new certificate program in medical humanities for undergraduate students. Jointly administered by the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts and by Professional and Continuing Education (PaCE), completed certificates will be credited with official transcripts issued by PaCE, a boon to those aiming for medical school.

“This exciting program highlights the importance of philosophy, literature, history and other humanities disciplines to a wide range of medical and public health professionals,” said John Majewski, Michael Douglas Dean of the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts. “A host of moral and ethical issues surrounding medicine and public health confront every society and culture, and the Medical Humanities Certificate Program will give students a chance to explore these issues in compelling ways connected to real-world experiences.”

Jason Prystowsky, M.D., can attest to that.

A UC Santa Barbara alumnus who double-majored in biology and philosophy, he went on to earn both a medical degree and a master's in public health from Northwestern University. Today he is an emergency room physician at Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, medical director for Santa Barbara City Fire Department — and both coordinator and lead lecturer for UCSB's nascent medical humanities certificate program.

"We need the future leaders of healthcare to have a background in ethics and history and literature and how different cultures look at health and healthcare — looking at spirituality and end of life, looking at resilience, mindfulness and burnout," Prystowsky said. "Physicians and nurses and allied health providers are not getting a strong enough background in this and when you look at our healthcare system it shows. With all the talent at UCSB in philosophy and history and comparative literature and art, religious studies, music — we have amazing educators here on campus. And students are starving for this training."

The program, which can be completed anytime over the course of a student's undergraduate career, includes two quarters of dedicated instruction by Prystowsky and a team of affiliated faculty. The core courses, Introduction to Medical Humanities and Medical Humanities in the World, offered through PaCE, will examine subjects from the history of medicine, medical ethics and medical anthropology, to medicine in literature, to mindfulness.

Students also will take three electives, chosen from approved, applicable courses in departments including English, religious studies, Chicana/o studies and East Asian languages and cultural Studies.

"The Medical Humanities program is a great opportunity for UCSB students interested in careers in the medical profession and in the healthcare industry," said Bob York, the dean of Professional and Continuing Education. "One of the charters of PaCE is to offer professional preparation for students for their lives after UCSB. And so, we are pleased to help play a role in facilitating the courses with Dr. Prystowsky and the Division of Humanities and Fine Arts."

Students who complete the certificate also will be eligible to apply for an individualized summer internship working with local health providers, giving them another layer of early training and likely making them more competitive in applying

to medical schools.

“We realized that there was student interest in this and that it was something that we could really build here,” said Mary Hancock, associate dean of humanities and fine arts. “Medical schools themselves are now including medical humanities tracks, and medical humanities issues come up on the MCAT exam. So there is a professional, career end to this, but also we think it will make them better, more resilient practitioners.

“There is a range of benefits for students right in the here and now, for their educational experience, and for their success moving forward, which will only be enhanced by the experience and the knowledge of medical humanities that they acquire,” Hancock added. “We are planting seeds. There is a great pedagogical element to this, and a personhood-building aspect as well.”

And it will all have immeasurable benefit to students who do go on to become medical professionals.

So said Prystowsky, also medical director of at Doctors Without Walls/Santa Barbara Street Medicine, who has served as a doctor in international conflict zones via US AID and NGOs, including Doctors Without Borders.

“We’re giving students the tools they need to be more effective healthcare providers who have a better capacity for critical decision making, a better capacity to relate to their patients and a better capacity to go from, ‘Ok, it’s 2 a.m. in the ICU, and I understand ventilators and heart problems but now let’s talk about goals,” he said. “Are our goals to be aggressive, or are our goals comfort and dignity?’ Those are values questions and there is a lot we can learn from the humanities.”

An interdisciplinary field that uses the humanities and the arts to explore the human mind and body, as well as the broader human condition, medical humanities aims to enhance the education, skills and practice of healthcare specialists. It also is intended to stimulate new research on public health, health equity and the broader socio-political contexts of health, disease and care, including the cultural, racial and gendered politics of health.

“Most students who want to be a doctor or a nurse, they study organic chemistry, biology, genetics. They’re not often talking about economics or studying the history of race and race tension in our nation, but these are really pertinent to health,” said

Prystowsky. “Being chronically unsheltered homeless has a worse 6-year mortality rate than being diagnosed with small cell adenocarcinoma — yet homelessness is not a traditional medical topic.

“We want to send our students to medical school already armed with this strong, diverse foundation,” he continued. “Ideally this will be our contribution to trying to make our healthcare system a little more resilient, more compassionate, more empathetic and more effective.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.