



## Seeking solace in poetry

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Poetry does its own thing. It not only chooses what it will be about, it often chooses how it will be written, who will write it, who will listen to it, and where. I am sure poets who have worked with their craft will disagree with me. Luckily, I am not one of them. I am raw as a March mango when it comes to poetry. I don't pretend to control it and hope I never will, though I wouldn't grudge me more ease with reading and writing it.

It was exactly this predicament surrounding poetry - this standing on the shore and having the waves tickle your feet but wanting to see what is at the heart of the ocean - that we deliberated on at the Poetry Reading Session at the University College of Medical Sciences (UCMS), Delhi, in June this year.

Anannya Dasgupta and I read poems, and facilitated a discussion around the tricks that poems play on poets and

what poets can do about this. Anannya - a published poet, founder of the poetry blog Daily Riyaz, and teacher of Literature - had quite a few tips for the poets in the room. Being more of a journalist and a novice poet, I mostly read poems and shared my experience of being played by the poetry I was trying to write.

Thus it was that a room full of students and faculty gathered to talk, listen, breathe, read and reflect on the machinations of poetry. It was the thick of the exam season; students who attended had made a clear choice to be there. They stayed well past the one hour they'd promised themselves. A vessel for "emotions recollected in tranquility," a "word doodle of complex feelings", a "record of our saddest moments" - poetry for them was all this and much more.

As students reflected on what poetry meant to them, it was not difficult to

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see how it could prepare them for a lifetime of practicing medicine, and help them negotiate the occasional bleakness that is inevitable in the arduous journey they have chosen.

What they said...

“Poetry adds color to what otherwise would be black and white.”

“Even when the words are simple, using them in a special way makes them exquisitely expressive.”

“When my emotions get engaged, I feel connected.”

“The mundane becomes spectacular.”

“It is a different way of looking at things; a different perspective.”

“This [poetry session] is like getting drunk in a safe space.”

“It adds another dimension to people when I hear them recite poetry. These are people that I think I know, when, in reality, I’d completely missed this aspect of their being all along.”

“After joining medicine I’d stopped writing poetry. I’m inspired to start again.”

“Poetry takes me to places I never knew existed.”

“There’s a depth to poetry that transcends mere words.”

“It compels me to examine my feelings.”

It was more than heartening to see students of medicine engaging with poetry so deeply. Much credit goes to the Professors who started the Medical Humanities programme and manage to keep the Poetry Club running, despite the continuous pull of academic targets. The programme was born of a desperate need to know their students, not read them like “answer sheets,” or treat them as “roll numbers.”

Though it is not a formal course in the college, students are encouraged to write, and to record their experience of studying medicine and interacting with patients. They contribute to this online journal, RHiME, that documents these experiments in bringing the humanities to medicine. “Many of them are sad stories but some have happy endings,” they say while talking of the real, living stories they come across as teachers and students at a Medical College Hospital.

As a March mango poet, I thoroughly enjoyed spending the afternoon feeling curious with this group about the magic that poetry weaves. What could be more useful than nudging doctors-to-be to subconsciously acknowledge that while the human body is just some words, it is the human being who is a poem?

I wish Parwaaz, the Poetry Club at UCMS, the best in their quest to use poetry alongside their medical training. This Club is bound to positively impact many a doctor-patient relationship in future, while also enabling doctors to feel rooted in their emotions. This effort to stir some soul into the realm of medical education is completely worth emulating. I sincerely hope that other medical institutions in the country take note and follow suit.