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## Why Teach Pharmacy Ethics Through Literary Fiction?



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### ABSTRACT

Pharmacy ethics is a challenging area in pharmacy education, as teaching it requires special recognition of complex pedagogical approaches. In accordance with the findings of recent studies focusing on the use of humanities in medical education, literary fiction may be an avenue that could be successfully employed as a thought-provoking tool for teaching pharmacy ethics. The major benefits of this approach includes increased empathy and complex interpretive skills, suitability for case-based learning, and students' high level of interest in this method, as well as the promotion of patient-centered care, creation of cultural competence, and encouragement of professionalism among pharmacy students. The successful instruction of pharmacy ethics through carefully selected examples from literary fiction, possibly in an elective course or a special module, may be a promising step forward in modern pharmacy education.

**Keywords:** curriculum, fiction, medical humanities, pharmacy education, pharmacy ethics

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### INTRODUCTION

The role and significance of pharmacy ethics have become especially complex in the last few decades, both because the pharmacy profession has become more patient-oriented and because there has been a rapid advancement of technology and electronic health systems. This also has resulted in dramatic increases in the number and variety of ethical dilemmas and other problems that pharmacists face in their daily practices. These ethical issues include decisions on choices related to drug therapies, uses of drugs for unapproved indications, patient

confidentiality, financial relationships with the drug industry, allocation of scarce resources, pain management, death and dying, and so on [1,2]. Because of ethical issues' significant impacts on patients' quality of life, pharmacists should give considerable thought to these issues and be able to utilize ethical principles (autonomy, beneficence, etc.), theories (utilitarianism, deontology, etc.) and/or codes of ethics when necessary. However, many pharmacists are either unable to detect ethical problems or do not act to address them accordingly. In this regard, there is a huge need for pharmacy ethics to be taught, especially as part of the undergraduate pharmacy curriculum, so that future

pharmacists can begin their professional careers with adequate knowledge and experience [3].

Pharmacy ethics, however, is a challenging area in pharmacy education, as teaching it requires special recognition of complex pedagogical approaches. Compared to laws, for example, ethical rules are much more morally binding; therefore, it is more difficult to promote ethical competence among pharmacy students. Agreeing with this, Mattick and Bligh (2006) showed that students consider the weaknesses in the teaching of medical ethics to include the confusing and dry nature of the subject's heavily theoretical aspects [4].

Although a number of studies have focused on the successful integration of courses in art and the medical humanities into pharmacy curricula [5-7], the method of using literary fiction to teach pharmacy ethics has not been clearly addressed. In considering this, my aim in the current editorial is to discuss this method, in light of findings from recent studies by giving several examples from literary fiction and by highlighting the expected outcomes and possible pitfalls of this approach.

#### LITERARY FICTION AS A TEACHING TOOL FOR PHARMACY ETHICS

According to previous endeavors in medical education, most of which have ended up successfully, literary fiction works (including novels, novellas, short stories, and plays) can be used to teach medical ethics [8-10]. Likewise, as a thought-provoking way of teaching pharmacy ethics, the use of literary fiction can be successfully employed in the pharmacy curricula. I believe there are three significant reasons for this.

First, to give readers a means of understanding a reality different from their own, literature may assist in the exploration and discovery of perspectives on a variety of subjects (e.g., aging, cancer, death, depression, disability, and sexuality) [11]. Therefore, literary examples may help pharmacy students to develop a deeper, more empathetic approach to their future patients and may familiarize them with ethical dilemmas or thorny issues that they may face during their daily practices [9,10].

Indeed, several studies have suggested that reading literature is helpful in enhancing readers' emotions, empathy, and complex interpretive skills, and in teaching them the theory of mind (ToM), which fosters the ability to understand others' mental states [6,11]. For instance, Mar *et al.* (2009) examined the effect that reading fiction had on empathy levels using the mind of the eyes test and observed that the more fiction people read, the

better were their empathy and understanding of others. Reading nonfiction, however, did not cause the same effect [12]. Bal and Veltkamp (2013) found that literary fiction influenced a reader's empathy only if he/she had experienced an emotional transportation into the story [13]. Kidd and Castano (2013) showed that reading literary fiction (compared with reading nonfiction, reading popular fiction, or not reading at all) led to better performance on tests of affective and cognitive ToM [14]. Moreover, Oatley (2016) discussed how literary fiction serves as a cognitive and emotional simulation of a variety of situations, which may include complex characters and circumstances; hence, the consciousness of self and others can be explored [15].

Second, because the debate method is an efficient way of discussing ethical issues in a class environment, literary examples may be very suitable for case-based learning in pharmacy ethics. Weinstein (1997) stated that the case-study method is efficient at teaching pharmacy ethics and preparing pharmacy students for many of the moral challenges they may face [16]. Hanna *et al.* (2014) also found that pharmacy students responded very favorably to program workshops that used debates on ethical pharmacy issues; the workshops resulted in pharmacy students developing skills in critical evaluation [17]. In parallel with previous papers that suggested the use of literary examples in teaching medical ethics [8,18], the study of literature in pharmacy education would provide rich cases for pharmacy ethics courses. Literary works that explore diseases such as dementia, HIV/AIDS, and mental illness could be used to stimulate ethical debates [6]. Because unethical issues can be solved privately instead of ending up in court, they may remain unknown to the public and to the academic and pharmaceutical communities; thus, literary works would also be advantageous in illustrating specific points that have been omitted from legal cases or the scientific literature.

Lastly, pharmacy students are likely to rate the use of humanities in curricula highly. For instance, Zimmermann (2013) assessed the effectiveness of a medical humanities teaching module that focused on pharmaceutical care for dementia patients, and the findings suggested both that pharmacy students were quite positive toward this approach and that they successfully learned when reading and discussing patient and caregiver narratives [7].

The use of literary fiction in pharmacy education may provide some additional benefits. For instance, Bumgarner *et al.* (2007) discussed four short stories related to pharmacy issues with first-year

pharmacy students, and they found this use of literary works to be an effective tool for nurturing and encouraging professionalism among students [5]. Bartol and Richardson (1998) further suggested that reading literature can be used to create cultural competence, which in turn may serve to increase the quality of communication between health care professionals and patients [19]. Many other studies have indicated that this method can also be useful in promoting patient-centered care, facilitating interdisciplinary teaching, motivating students to continue learning, developing their critical conceptualization and observational skills, providing inspiration and enjoyment (thus counteracting professional burnout), increasing teamwork and leadership capacity, and reducing biomedical hubris [6,9,18,20-21].

### SELECTED WORKS FROM LITERARY FICTION

In fact, both classics and modern literary fiction works offer a wide variety of examples that can be used as case studies to teach pharmacy ethics [22]. Here are some brief notes on several popular examples of literary fiction from the last two centuries:

Monsieur Homais, the long-winded, grasping, and deceitful pharmacist character from Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1856), is one of the most vivid examples of pharmacists who can be cited within this context [23]. Monsieur Homais is one of the earliest realistic critics of the pharmacy profession's gradual transformation into a business in the 19th century and of pharmacists' tendency to place patients' well-being after their own self-interest. Likewise, Anton Chekhov's recently discovered short story entitled "At the Pharmacy" (1885) is quite notable. This story depicts a sulky-faced, arrogant, mercenary pharmacist who mistreats his suffering patient-customer, Igor Alexeyevich Svoykin, and refuses to give him his prescribed medicine because Svoykin is unable to pay a fee of a single brass farthing [24].

Another example that deserves citing here is George Bernard Shaw's *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906), a comedic play (although Shaw called it a tragedy) that deals with the moral dilemmas created by scarce medical resources. Sir Colenso Ridgeon, a prominent research doctor, discovers a cure for tuberculosis but only has enough medicine to cure one patient. He is faced with the decision of whether to save a kindly but poor medical colleague or a truly gifted but unpleasant artist; the artist has a young wife with whom Ridgeon himself is in love [25].

More recent examples that confront unethical issues occurring within the pharmaceutical industry include the following novels: *The Blue Chips* (1957) by Jay Deiss, *Pax* (1958) by Middleton Kiefer, *Strong Medicine* (1984) by Arthur Hailey, *Acceptable Risk* (1994) by Robin Cook, and *The Constant Gardener* (2001) by John le Carré. For instance, *Acceptable Risk* deals with the risky use of a newly developed psychotropic drug named Ultra whose safety has not been verified, and it depicts the transition of a mild-mannered academic into an avaricious, enigmatic character [26].

We should also mention another example, written from the pharmacist's perspective: Carson McCullers's novel *Clock without Hands* (1961) talks about a 40-year-old, small-town pharmacist, J.T. Malone, who confronts his leukemia after being given only a year to live [27].

There is an abundance of other examples that do not directly deal with pharmacy-related issues but that could still be helpful for increasing pharmacists' empathy and helping them develop ethical behaviors in their practices. Leo Tolstoy's novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886) is one of the most popular literary examples for exploring the human recognition of suffering; it is about a man who is isolated from his family and friends by a terminal illness [28]. Lisa Genova's novel *Still Alice* (2007) is another poignant example that may serve to help pharmacy students understand patients' perspectives; it focuses on a 50-year-old Harvard professor who suffers early-onset dementia [29].

### POSSIBLE PITFALLS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the abovementioned positive outcomes of using literary fiction to teach pharmacy ethics, we should bear in mind that some barriers to implementing this approach efficiently exist. The process of selecting literary examples that are well-suited to teaching pharmacy ethics is both difficult and time-consuming. Moreover, the cultural conflicts that the texts include should also be taken into account, as such conflicts may possibly lead to a declining empathy among students taking the courses [30]. Some other weak points of this method include the lack of academic staff who have both the interest and the relevant knowledge, the limited hours allocated to teaching pharmacy ethics in the curriculum, the necessity of dividing students into small groups, and the students' varying personal interests and tastes in reading fiction [21]. Yet, most of these challenges can be overcome through concerted effort, substantial research in the field, and technology-enhanced learning.

**CONCLUSION**

The successful use of literary fiction to teach pharmacy ethics, possibly as an elective course or a special module, may be a promising step forward in modern pharmacy education. As Teagarden (2013) stated, “literary texts offer pharmacy students the content and inspiration they need to imagine the whole illness experience and condition different experiences to use this knowledge with patients [6].” Cases selected from literary fiction can be used in various methodological ways: as reading assignments, for close readings, as a basis for reflective questioning or writing, and to inspire pharmacy students’ individual thoughts. Hence, these readings can help students recognize ethical dilemmas and respond in accordance with the relevant codes of conduct. This approach will not

only enrich pharmacy students’ professional, ethical, and even cultural perspectives but may also help them to recognize the human dimensions of health and illness, dispel their notions of a monolithic culture, and help them acquire authenticity in pharmacy education. The utility of literary fiction in pharmacy education can also serve to bridge the gap between theory and practice as long as this method is not simply reduced to a tool of analysis in a perfunctory way that lacks humanity—what should be its very essence.

Further research is clearly necessary to determine the value of this novel approach. Future studies with strong designs should demonstrate whether it is an effective way in the classroom to teach pharmacy ethics and can also affect students’ ethical decisions.

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