

The Art of Medicine Rounds Touches Hearts

Dedication to medicine and science are the tenets of physician faculty, residents and medical students at The University of Alabama College of Community Health Sciences. Thoughtful history-taking, thorough physical examination, and judicious ordering of tests are the essential components of diagnosis and treatment.

But the practice of medicine is far more than diseases, laboratory and x-ray findings, operations and medications. The Art of Medicine Rounds, a longstanding CCHS event held on the first Thursday of each month, was created to remind health professionals of the reason they entered their fields: people. A well-rounded physician must not only know how to prescribe medications but also to listen to patients' concerns.

Music, art, sculpture and dance might not at first be thought of as integral to the practice of medicine, but the humanities can help connect students with teachers, colleagues with peers, and patients with physicians.

"To me, the beauty of this lecture series is that it covers a diverse range of topics such as poetry, dance, music, and visual arts in a fairly casual setting, which allows for attendees to learn and exchange ideas freely," said Lily Mahler, a third year medical student completing clinical rotations at University Medical Center.

The get-togethers of around two dozen faculty, staff, students and visitors provides an opportunity for the CCHS community to learn about a subject not usually offered in the medical school curriculum. More than 70 different presenters from a broad array of disciplines, both on and off the UA campus, have presented at the Art of Medicine Rounds since CCHS Family Medicine Professor Dr. Alan Blum and Health Sciences Library Director Nelle Williams initiated the series in August 2012.

Blum, who holds the Gerald Leon Wallace, M.D., Endowed Chair in Family Medicine at the College, is internationally known for his passionate and satirical efforts to counteract the promotion of cigarettes and other killer products.

Williams, an associate professor, is considered to be one of the most detail-oriented, thorough and conscientious faculty members at CCHS—and every researcher's go-to resource person.

"We balance each other," Blum said. "I want to push the boundaries at the risk of occasionally ruffling a few feathers, while Nelle methodically considers each step. We meet in the middle. It works well."

The idea for the Art of Medicine Rounds arose from Blum's participation in the 1990s and early-2000s as a presenter in an annual lecture series, "Compassion and the Art of Medicine," at Baylor College of Medicine, where he was on the faculty. "Compassion" was created by Baylor medical ethicist Warren Holleman, PhD, who hosted nationally recognized speakers.

Blum was also familiar with the CCHS First Friday Lecture Series, which was started in 1981 by the chair of internal medicine, Dr. William Winternitz. It ended in the early 2000s upon Winternitz's retirement.

As with First Friday, the presenters at the Art of Medicine Rounds have come from a wide variety of disciplines. Dozens of UA faculty in the fields of art, music, dance, poetry, sculpture, history, theater, journalism and philosophy have served as presenters. Each Rounds opens with an audience discussion of an artwork selected by Blum.

The main event is an hour-long interactive guest presentation. Most of the speakers are selected by Blum from his ever-expanding pool of professional and personal contacts. The Health Sciences Library faculty and staff all contribute to the work of the series. Williams works with Blum to contact and schedule speakers. Jacqueline Cochrane, library clerk, arranges the event space and orders catering and refreshments. The CCHS Dean's Office generously provides a light dinner.

Andrea Wright, clinical/technical services librarian and associate professor at CCHS, sets up the growing number of Art of Medicine Rounds in which the presenter is teleported in via Zoom. The adaption to evolving technology and the willingness to expand online shows the innovative spirit, foresight and dedication to the continuation of the series.

“Many of our faculty have reached out to us to offer to speak, as a way of sharing their passions for medicine and teaching,” Williams said.

CCHS faculty presenters in the Art of Medicine Rounds series include Drs. Pamela Payne-Foster, Mercedes Morales-Aleman, Robert Sheppard, Drake Lavender, Jane Weida, Heather Taylor, Cecily Collins, John Wheat, Richard Friend, Rick Streiffer, Jared Ellis, Thad Ulzen, Lea Yerby, and Tamer Elsayed, as well as administrative staffer Kirsten Henry-Paxton, photographer Greg Randall, and former faculty member Dr. Bob Pieroni.

In 2019, Dr. Ed Geno, assistant professor in the Department of Family, Internal, and Rural Medicine, performed with his singing group, the Crimson Pride Chorus, at a special Christmas edition of the series. Dr. Connie Leeper assistant professor of family, internal and rural medicine, and her husband Toshio, a physical therapist, taught salsa dancing and the role of dance in health and well-being.

CCHS professor emeritus and former rural physician and professor and chair of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Dr. Dan Avery, has shared stories from his book, *Tales of a Country Obstetrician*.

“The first time I attended Art of Medicine was shortly after I started working at UMC,” said Melani Harrell, administrative secretary at CCHS. “I had no idea what to expect but I found it to be very interesting and something that I actually enjoyed. I started inviting family and friends to attend with me and some of them have continued to come each month.”

Here are some other highlights of the series:

- Canadian pediatric neurologist and accordionist Dr. Wendy Stewart gave an informative presentation via Zoom on the impact of music on the brain.
- Birmingham humorist and artist Dr. Don Stewart showed his whimsical drawings.
- Artist Caleb O’Connor gave a behind-the-scenes talk about the Alabama history murals for the Tuscaloosa Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse.
- UA sculptor Craig Wedderspoon inspired the audience with his story of resuming his artistic career after a stroke.
- Scottish artist Mark Gilbert discussed his series of portraits of children with epilepsy and patients with cancer.
- Canadian author Barbara Sibbald read excerpts of her book of short stories, *The Museum of Possibilities*.
- Widely published poet Kathryn Starbuck gave a moving reading and discussion of her grief-inspired poetry, and Alabama poet laureate Jennifer Horne read from her books of poetry.
- Professional magicians Tommy Ellison and Curt Anderson performed “An evening of magic and medicine.”
- The Tuscaloosa Hand in Paw animal-assisted therapy group introduced the audience to two of their therapy dogs.
- Nathan Ballard and Jamaica Cooper shared their experiences in overcoming problems with cerebral palsy.
- Dr. Richard Richards, chair of the Department of Philosophy, spoke about his book, *The Biology of Art*.
- UA director of Music Therapy Dr. Andrea Cevasco-Trotter played her guitar and talked about the role of music in recovery from illness.

- UA history professor Dr. David Beito and Stillman College history professor Dr. Linda Beito discussed their book on Mississippi surgeon and civil rights leader Dr. T. R. M. Howard.
- UA History Professor John Giggie spoke about the creation of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery.
- UA playwright and director Seth Panitch screened a preview of his film, *Service to Man*, about his father's medical school experiences as a minority.
- UA communications professor Dr. Darren Griffin and hearing-impaired doctoral student Kent Schafer gave a presentation on American Sign Language and the experience of deafness.

"You never know what topics people are going to gravitate to," Williams said.

"We send out the notice to all in the College, post flyers around the building, and then we wait. We have a great core group, but we are hoping everyone will give the Art of Medicine a try."

Currently, the series has a steady attendance of around two dozen, with as many as 40, such as at Dr. Geno's and his choir's performance.

"As Dr. Blum always says, the latest session is the greatest session. I enjoy all of them but three stand out — the poetry session about Robert Frost, the dancing session with Connie Leeper, and the chance to visit the Tuscaloosa Museum of Art stand out as my favorites among many," said Dr. John McDonald, a frequent attendee and interim chair of the CCHS Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology.

McDonald and fellow faculty members said they appreciate the unique opportunity that the Art of Medicine provides to get outside of their comfort zone and experience the cultures and perspectives that physicians don't experience in a traditional medical education.

"Very few medical schools have such a formal arts-related series, especially at schools of our size," notes Blum.

He and Williams would like to see more medical students, residents, nurses and administrative staff attend.

Blum knows that students and residents have a lot on their plate, but he believes that a monthly dinner with colleagues outside of the usual bustle of clinics and classes can help build friendships and enhance empathy.

"This series is an opportunity for all involved in caring for patients to remember that there is more to the practice of medicine than ordering tests, performing procedures, and prescribing medications," Blum said. "Patients, too, recognize the role of music, art, poetry, theater, novels, movies and dance in healing."