A Body of Work: An Anthology of Poetry and Medicine

Corinna Wagner and Andy Brown (Editors)

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Verse is for healthy

arty-farties. The dying

and surgeons use prose.

This haiku is the first of hundreds of poems related to medicine and the body in this innovative and substantial anthology, the first of its kind of this magnitude, which indicates the growing popularity and influence of the medical humanities.

Each of the eight sections such as Consuming, Treatment and Hospitals, Practitioners and Professionals, comprises of a chronologically arranged series of poems on the relevant topic followed by a short selection of historical prose writing which provides some context for the verse. The first section, Body as Machine, for example, includes the inevitable extract from Offray De La Mettrie’s 1749 *Man as Machine* but more surprisingly part of William James 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience* in the prose section.

The poems themselves provide rich seams of material to mine for illustrations for medical writing and for use in class group exercises for example in communication skills and understanding empathy and expanding the capacity to express it. All of life is gathered here. From the humorous

A mighty creature is the germ,

though smaller than the pachyderm (Ogden Nash *The Germ* 1925)

to the sobering ,

disease has expanded my horizons

and pain

spread the good word (Peter Meinke *The Patient* 1977)

from ecstatic joy,

Oft have I thrilled at deeds of high emprise (Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson *To Madame Curie* 1921)

to dark despair

Yes! In the radiant air how could I know

How black it is, how fast it is, below? (Mary F Robinson *Neurasthenia* 1888)

and of course from birth

It is birth: at the first breath how curiously

the tissue of the lungs flower

with the sudden inrush of blood. (Jo Shapcott *Twin Found in Man’s Chest* 2002)

to death

Dead kids upset me.

There’s no drink

to take away the taste

of a fresh face rotting. (Dorothy Parker *Dead Kids* 1994)

and perhaps even beyond

In your afterlife nightie

You are pirouetting expectantly for the last time. (Paul Duncan *Golden Mothers Driving West* 2009)

Poetry, as the book’s foreword suggests is a way of storytelling “that is particularly adaptable to making sense of our experiences of living and dying in a body.” This volume helps us as GPs, to do this both for ourselves and our patients.

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