Physicianship at McGill is our “ribbon” program. That means it consists of courses that run through all 4 years in order to emphasize the roles of the physician as a healer and professional. The intent of running these courses through 4 years “like a ribbon” is to emphasize that these roles apply no matter what stage of training, and what discipline the students are working in. The team that has risen to the occasion to develop this program, under Dr. Don Boudreau, has an important, but often difficult task. The challenges have ranged from promoting the importance of these principles within our own faculty and students, to developing new teaching and evaluation methods. Dealing with these challenges has lead to innovative new programs – a mentoring program (Physician Apprenticeship) with intensive faculty development for the mentors, sessions at the simulation centre on communication skills and dealing with difficult people, student portfolios which include reflective essays, a community organization involvement program, and recall days during clerkship which allow students to share some of the intense clinical experiences they are living.

As we encourage medical students to become reflective physicians, we the physician teachers are reminded again and again of the importance of fostering our own growth in this area. The McGill Programs in Whole Person Care support this with workshops, seminars and films, and has been a valuable resource for the Physicianship program.

At the Faculty of Medicine, we continuously evaluate what we do and the Physicianship program is no exception. We have recently hired a new member to the Centre for Medical Education, Sonia Faremo, whose initial major mandate is to help us evaluate the Physicianship program. This will mean regular “upgrades” – part of our commitment to ensure that our medical teaching is always cutting edge.

The addition of the Physicianship program to our already strong basic science and clinical training will result in McGill trained physicians being better than ever - skilled and committed to caring for patients, involved in the community, and life-long learners.

Teaching Physicians the Healer Role: The McGill Experience

- Dr. Helen Mc Namara, MD, MSC

The Physicianship Program at McGill Medical School is relatively new and while the core curriculum addresses physician’s required knowledge and skills, Physicianship is mainly concerned with teaching the attitudes required to be a good doctor. The two major roles in Physicianship are those of the Healer and the Professional. As stated by Dr. Sylvia Cruess, “Healing is the mandate of medicine and professionalism is how it is organized”.

The Healer Role component has been developed by a core team from the McGill Programs in Whole Person Care (Drs. McNamara, Hutchinson, Mount, Ms. Lavery) with input from our Focus Group (Drs. Ghadirian, Lawlor, Smilovitch), as well as other faculty members and guest speakers (Drs. Cassell, Kearney, Kuhl, Maté) over the last two years.

The teaching of the Healer Role is based on two primary objectives: relief of suffering and promotion of healing. In terms of patient suffering, our goals for our medical students include the ability to recognize and acknowledge suffering, while finding its cause and taking steps to relieve it. In terms of patient healing, we acknowledge that healing occurs within the patient but we explore the role of the physician in the possible initiation, promotion, and acceleration of the healing process, through the active creation of a healing relationship with the patient. Another important objective is to teach the medical students not to inadvertently inhibit the healing process, or cause wounding in the patient. We teach that the creation of a healing relationship is possible by communicating our caring and compassion through presence, accompanying, and commitment to the patient.

The course is designed around six concepts and the first of these (Relating to the Patient) is in an interactive forum with one of our patients with a chronic illness who has had both positive and negative experiences with doctors and medical students. With the input of Dr. Pickering and Dr. Laporta, we have developed the second module (Relating to Team Members) which is delivered at the McGill Medical Simulation Centre, where medical students are exposed to simulated difficult situations in order to explore and improve their skills in dealing with interactions that may occur in stressful situations, in order to promote a successful healing environment.
As Malcolm Gladwell said, “We learn by example and direct experience, because there are real limits to the adequacy of verbal instruction,” and this is especially true of teaching the Healer Role in the context of Physicianship. With this in mind, two of our modules (Relief of Suffering & Promotion of Healing; The Patient-Physician Relationship) are delivered as part of the Physician Apprentice (PA) Program. In this program, led by Dr. Slapcoff, groups of medical students are mentored and taught throughout their four-year program by a dedicated group of McGill physician-teachers, known as Osler Fellows. This allows these concepts to be embedded in experiential learning, through the clinical experiences of the medical students and the Osler Fellows.

Our fourth module (The Patient Perspective & The Physician Perspective) is taught as a full day activity at the medical school. This day involves a panel of faculty sharing their perspectives as physicians and “lessons learned” in an interactive forum with the medical students, followed by a similar approach involving patients and “physician/medical student patients” sharing the lessons they have learned from their experiences as patients that made them better doctors.

The final module (Integrating the Course Concepts) brings all the previous work together, in addition to turning the healing focus on the medical students themselves. As stated by Novack (Toward Creating Physician Healers), “Critical and often neglected factors in healing are the personal development and well-being of the healer”. With this in mind, we address the importance of self-care in our profession and our individual responsibility to know what is available to us in terms of support and in terms of recognition and avoidance of compassion fatigue and burnout, which can seriously impair the competence of our best doctors. The development of a “mindful medical practice” and “self-reflection” are possible protective mechanisms that could enhance both patient care and the doctor’s personal experience of Physicianship at its best.

The Healer Role is based on a combination of what we do, how we do it, and who we are while we are doing it. It has been suggested that a good doctor incorporates evidence-based practice, patient-centered care and reflective practice. This may appear to be an ambitious undertaking, which no doubt the practice of medicine is, but perhaps the Healer Role could be summarized in the words of Dr. Viktor Frankl, “I wanted to be a good doctor. I hope I was no bad doctor. But, finally, I wanted to remain a human being. I still try”.

The practice of medicine challenges each of us every day, as doctors or as patients. Choosing, however, to mold the views of the future generations of doctors is a challenge very few would dare to tackle. A conscious and devoted team of practicing physicians and administrators decided to face the challenge and create a culture among McGill medical students of integrity, self-awareness and empathy.

The practice of medicine is punctuated by joyful moments: attending our first delivery and witnessing the light in the new parents’ eyes, learning that a worrisome mass is not that worrisome in the end, the resilience of a 5-year old child facing leukemia. It is, however, the painful moments that are engraved in our memory: announcing the death of a loved one, explaining the course of a deadly progressive disease, failing to reach out to a patient who later commits suicide. As medical students, we are being swirled rapidly into this world of rapid intimacy with patients and families and how can we, as individuals, cope with these situations?

The patient-doctor relationship can be a very gratifying encounter as well as a step on the way to burnout if mismanaged. It is in this perspective that the healing part of the physicianship program was elaborated: a desire not only to create life-long learners but also life-long self-aware physicians. The Class of 2009 had the privilege this year to experience the Simulation Centre sessions on Relating to Team Members and the first recall days on The Patient and The Physician Perspective and Palliative Care. In the midst of our first clinical experiences, the team of physicians working in the physicianship program, led by Dr. McNamara and Dr. Hutchinson, created a space for reflection and sharing. What a relief to hear during the recall day that my colleagues do experience frustration, sadness and illness. And the attending staff as well! Often, it is not that students or physicians do not question the feelings they are experiencing, it is that no spaces exists to share those thoughts and validate them. Students can benefit from one another’s experience as much as from practicing physicians. Invaluable insights are put forward for us to appreciate and put into practice.

An article on the subject written by Dr. E.B. Larson compares development of empathy to “the maturing of a fine wine”. It is, in fact, a long haul process with short term impacts but most importantly we hope, lifelong consequences.
The Shoe Laces

by Fanny Silviu-Dan, MD (WPC Physician Writing Group)

I had arrived at Ben Gurion one week earlier, on a sunny day. Outside the airport, the air – impregnated with a heavy scent of heat and dry desert herbs – hit me in the face. I took a deep breath to make the adjustment.

I did not see him at once.

“Welcome” his warm tenor voice soon reached me from close by. “Welcome home.”

I glanced at him as we disengaged from our embrace. He seemed to have aged a lot since the previous year. His light-brown suit looked oversized; the tie, large around his neck.

“I lost some weight” he told me smiling, reading my thoughts with ease. “I think it is the dentures. I am not yet used to them.”

We stayed in line for the cab.

“Move faster, lady! You think I have time only for you?” shouted the driver as we hurriedly put the luggage at the back of the car.

As we sped away on the winding road, and with our driver showing a sort of fury against all that was slow, I let myself seized by a blissful sense of security that only children under parental protection can have. I talked incessantly: my studies, my new love, politics. He listened and interjected with wise or humorous remarks.

At the foot of the hills, a few cars were stopped on the side of the road. Men were struggling to open the door of a large car, to no avail. The roof of the car was sunken in. The passengers, all bearded, pale-faced rabbis dressed in black caftans, with widely open eyes and fixed gaze sat straight in their seats, with unnatural immobility. Blood streamed on one’s forehead and he did not wipe it. Were they dead, and still sitting?

“They are in shock” said father as the driver continued his race with an imaginary competitor.

For a second I felt death waved its airy tentacles from the injured men into the open windows of our car, ever so imperceptibly. I shrugged away from its trajectory, towards the middle seat.

Father was now seeing a patient, the last of the day. We would fly overseas together the following morning, for him to attend my graduation.

His office was in our apartment, the waiting room at the entrance. I liked to watch people coming in with a preoccupied expression before the visit, only to leave reassured by the doctor’s knowledge and kindness.

The last patient was an old man of short stature, about my father’s age. His white hair in a buzz cut, his round, suntan face with wrinkles around the blue eyes. I had seen him walk with a limp, frowning in pain.

The consultation over, father opened the door and told me I could start to clean up the room. The treatment must have helped. The little man appeared relieved of his discomfort but tired, as having endured the pain for an eternity.

I was happy to play the ad-hoc assistant. I gathered syringes, gauze, gowns. The old man seated on a chair, father was still giving him advice. Yes, he showed a certain frailty I had never noticed before.

The patient bent a couple of times to do his laces but he could not reach the shoes. Without hesitation and with the most natural air, the other old man – the doctor – kneeled and tied the patient’s laces. There was no “thank you”, the man was listening intently to the treatment plan. And anyway, it was all in a physician’s day’s work. Neither I, nor father exchanged a word about this moment.

We made the trip together to the city of B. It was my father’s last voyage. He died a few days later, unexpectedly and shockingly like an accident in his pathway and mine. The little man was to have been his last patient; tying his laces was his last, indelible statement to me as I was starting my own journey.
Films That Transform—Season IV
The next season of our Whole Person Care Film
The powerful new NFB documentary:
Triage: Dr. James Orbinski’s Humanitarian Dilemma. James Orbinski has seen lives saved and
lives lost, and has personally witnessed a world gone astray.
The English Surgeon—a fascinating portrait of Dr. Henry Marsh as he wrestles with the dilemmas of
the doctor-patient relationship.
The Last Days of Living—the classic NFB documentary about the Royal Victoria Hospital’s pioneer-
ing Palliative Care Unit.
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly—Julian Schnabel’s visually stunning, heart-stirring ode to what
drives a man to go on when all truly seems lost.
The schedule for the series will be available in Autumn 2008. Please check our website for updates, or email
wpc.oncology@mcgill.ca to be added to our mailing list.

McGill Seminars on Healing 2008
All seminars take place at 546 Pine Ave. West, from 12:30—2 pm.
Please RSVP to 398-2298 or wpc.oncology@mcgill.ca

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The Sun Never Says
-Hafiz

Even
After
All this time
The sun never says to the earth

“You owe
Me.”

Look
What happens
With a love like that,
It lights the
Whole
Sky.

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