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## AIDS specialist combines 2 arts to create a science of healing

Abraham Verghese was about 11 or 12 and living in Ethiopia with his parents when he realized he wanted to be a physician - not any old of physician, but a little like Philip Carey, the club-footed, sensitive hero of W. Somerset Maugham's 1915 novel, "Of Human Bondage," which he was reading then.

Verghese, who had no head for math as his brothers and physicist parents did, felt he had found something.

"I went into medicine because of 'Of Human Bondage,'" Verghese said last week. "In the novel, after struggling to be an artist in Paris, Philip goes back to London and goes to medical school and he sees humanity there in the rough. Those lines just hit me, and I suddenly felt if I couldn't do math I could do people . . . Not everybody could do (math or) art, but anybody could do people and if you applied yourself to medicine you could do it very well. In it was the equivalent of a romantic artistic pursuit."

Literature - art - took Verghese to medicine. But it never abandoned him at medicine's doorstep.

Today, at 51, Verghese has melded two callings into a passionate discipline, one that acknowledges emotion in medicine and uses

art to help understand the human core of the patient.

Verghese, whose own non-fiction books "My Own Country" and "The Tennis Partner" have elevated him to the ranks of bestselling literary artist, is director of the Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics at the University of Texas in San Antonio.

A professor of ethics and medicine, he also is a certified clinician in pulmonary and infectious diseases and internal medicine.

In other words, he's a working doc and a working writer and a working teacher.

On Thursday, he comes to Milwaukee to help launch the Medical College of Wisconsin's medical humanities program with a public lecture and private lunches with students and faculty.

His lecture topic: "In Search of the Medical in Medical Humanities."

Abraham Verghese



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- Abraham Verghese

Medical humanities refers to the use of literature, film, painting, dance, music - any art form with a medical bent - and the social sciences to help physicians become more reflective and empathetic.

"These medical humanities programs are relatively new ventures in medical education," Verghese said from his office in San Antonio. "It is an attempt to remind the student and keep the student aware of the patient's life experience. Too often in medical training, we get so narrowly focused on the disease that we sometimes lose the ability to manage fully the patient's suffering.

"And as one novelist (Dorothy Allison) said, fiction is the great lie that tells the truth about how people really live. If you want to understand the nature of the end of life or dying of cancer, you can read that in a textbook. But to really feel it, there is nothing like reading 'The Death of Ivan Ilych' by Tolstoy, or any documentaries told by patients."

Verghese believes that students come to medicine "with a wonderful ability to imagine people's sufferings," but the paradox of traditional medical education is that "people get so caught up in the science that there is a danger the patient can become the heart attack in bed 3 or the diabetic foot in bed 4."

The program he leads in Texas includes narrative and story during all four years of med school to explore such matters as medical ethics, the fact that there are powerful connections to a human heart that take heart transplants beyond tissue typing, and the great implications that students' medical careers can have on their personalities, their marriages and their own emotional well-being. (The rate of suicide

among doctors and dentists is 20-fold higher than in other groups, Verghese noted.)

Students in cardiology, for example, learn not only the heart's function, but also its meaning.

Verghese is highly regarded in this relatively new educational thrust - actually, a contemporary reincarnation of the old days when the doctor visited by horse and buggy.

Physician and professor Arthur Derse, who directs the Medical College of Wisconsin's humanities program, says Verghese "exemplifies the best of the humanities in medicine," for he is "the consummate practitioner of the humanistic principles."

Indeed, Verghese has lived, and lives, what he preaches.

Born in Ethiopia in 1955 to parents who had emigrated from India, he attended medical school there until he was forced to leave when civil war shut down the university.

He came to the United States, where he worked as a hospital orderly in New Jersey before moving to India to get a medical degree.

After graduating, he completed a residency in internal medicine at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City, then finished a fellowship in infectious diseases in Boston, and returned once again to Johnson City, Tenn., where he developed an expertise in AIDS cases.

Emotionally drained from treating AIDS patients, he took off in 1990 to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop (where he also worked in the university AIDS clinic) and began working on what was to become his memoir, "My Own Country: A Doctor's

Story," a poignant recounting of the deadly AIDS outbreak in rural Tennessee and his helplessness in the face of it. The book later was made into a TV movie.

His preoccupation with AIDS in rural Tennessee damaged his first marriage and left him a changed man.

"I'm a native of experiences that have humbled me," he said. "My generation felt that we could fix everything. The conceit of cure. I went into infectious diseases because I thought that was a specialty that could really cure things. It's a paradox that a disease like AIDS landed in my lap."

Verghese said he learned that there's a difference between healing and curing someone, and that "what people want to feel is that they were cared for, that everything was done to try to support them."

He realized that his interest in his patients' stories, interest that went beyond their T-cell count, was in some way important to them.

"I was leaving the medical complex and entering their homes, and that act was borne out of frustration," he said. "I suddenly realized I was tapping into the power that a medical doctor possesses, a power that most had dismissed as not worth their time."

A few years later, in "The Tennis Partner," his second book, he explored another issue

relevant to medical folk - the addiction of a medical student.

The book was named a New York Times notable book and is being made into a movie.

Verghese, who has written for The New Yorker, Granta and Sports Illustrated as well as for several medical journals, is completing a novel, "Cutting for Stone," for Knopf.

He writes early in the morning and late at night, leaving the days open for his medical work.

"I don't think I would ever give up medicine," he said when asked if he would abandon one or the other someday. "So much of my own writing is glued to this idea of being a physician. I am fully occupied and identify with the role of being a physician. I see that as a blessing and a calling for incomplete individuals like me. This is a great gift of medicine - it completes you and by doing it well, you fulfill your destiny . . . And the writing to me is an extension of the medicine."

*Abraham Verghese's lecture is from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. Thursday at the Health Research Center Auditorium at the Medical College of Wisconsin. It is free and open to the public. A reception follows the lecture. E-mail: [gjensen@journal sentinel.com](mailto:gjensen@journal sentinel.com)*