

HEART 2009, Jonathan Terry

Imagine 25 fourth-year medical students in a room. Pictures come to mind of pressed, short white coats, fingers quickly flipping through the Sanford Guide, pens scratching away at unfinished progress notes. There's a certain sterility in the air as forced conversations emerge: "Are you on call tonight?" "Sorry, I need to return this page." "What are they serving in the cafeteria today?" "I hope we get off early -- tonight is my son's birthday party." The flow of knowledge is unquestionable, as is the unspoken, yet overwhelmingly tangible adrenaline in the air. This is medical education.

Imagine those same 25 medical students in another room, one month later. This is April 2009: the last rotation these students will serve before starting as interns in the summer. Sunshine warms hardwood floors through sliding glass doors. Outside, a California Blue Jay glides through the valiant Redwoods. This month, 25 medical students have applied and been hand-selected to be part of a fundamentally cooperative, integrative, and intentional community. Instead of racing through patient dictations, these students gently and purposefully work the soil at a local Homeless Garden Project. Instead of toting styrofoam boxes up to the student call room, they work together in the kitchen, preparing organic, ecologically-conscious meals with local produce. At the most basic level, the 60 wholesome meals this group will prepare together represent the one goal of this unique rotation: nourishment. It is not just a nourishment of the clinical mind, but a true feeding of the heart and soul.

Appropriately named, the AMSA Humanistic Elective in Alternative Medicine and Reflective Transformation (HEART) is about this attention to sustenance. When the program started in 2002, the original planners understood how four years of studying textbooks, poor nutrition, and hours away from family were profoundly isolating. A pilot elective was launched by AMSA, dubbed the Living Integral Global Healing and Transformation (LIGHT). Twenty one 4th-year medical students from across the United States were exposed to holistic healing modalities, lectures, and case presentations. The current HEART rotation, modeled in part from the preceding LIGHT rotation, seeks to incorporate poetry, literature, the arts, community health, and humanism, along with evidence-based approaches to complementary and alternative medicine.

This year's HEART rotation was one of the strongest yet. Accredited by the Univ of Florida and AMSA, full-time faculty included accomplished authors, residency directors, and humanism scholars from medical schools across the country. In line with the program's backbone of community-building, guest speakers lived, worked, and ate with the medical students. Topics, ranging from social justice in medicine to establishing pharmaceutical take-back programs were presented in lectures, discussions, and experiential group activities. Speakers came with the expectation that these students had all spent four years learning medicine; this month, in contrast, was to learn how to be a physician, a community member, a volunteer, and a healer.

For me, HEART was unlike any of my other rotations. Like many medical students, I wrote application essays four years ago, laced with humanism, a desire to serve, and a yearning for true human connection. Medical school, while rewarding in countless ways, made few conscious efforts to develop my heart and soul: the tools through which I'll be communicating daily with my patients and their families. I remember being told that I was my "first patient" and being reminded of the proverb from the book of Luke: Physician, Heal Thyself. HEART not only showed me these things, but it also connected me with an essential community of like-minded individuals, eagerly searching for health in our education about disease. As medical students, we know doctors have the ability to profoundly influence the world around us. HEART was about showing us how.

In the year following the HEART rotation, each of the 25 medical students who have participated will have contact with approx. 2000 patients, as well as countless family members, medical students, physicians, and other health care providers. In just the internship year, AMSA's HEART program will have touched the lives of more than 50,000 people. As a HEART participant, I feel that each of the individuals with whom I interact will benefit from the parts of me that came out this month: the volunteer, the writer, the nutrition-oriented chef, and most importantly, the listener and the learner. Yes, medical school has prepared me for how to be, I hope, an excellent physician; now, I have learned what it means to be a healer.