When characterizing my parents, the three words I have to describe my mom are: democrat, extrovert, and accountant, and the three words I would use to describe my dad are: republican, introvert, and physician. These polar opposites lead to very interesting conversations at the dinner table. In the early days of the pandemic, my mom started our family dinner conversation telling us that she heard about how the entire Coronavirus was made by the Chinese government as an act of bioterrorism.

My dad quietly sat back and heard all that she had to say and then responded with, “Where is the evidence? What is the source? Who told you this?”

My mother could only respond with, “My friend in this big WhatsApp group sent a message about it.”

“Well honey, how can you blindly believe such a large accusation like that?” My father, a physician for the last 25 years, has always relied on science and the use of evidence-based medicine not only in his office, but also in conversations at home.

I am fortunate enough to live in a household where I have learned to be open minded and listen to two sides of a story. In a time where news articles, scientific articles, and social media are all producing a plethora of information it is hard to know where to look and what to believe. In contrast to the way the Lacks’ felt not knowing anything about what was happening in the scientific community with Henrietta, in our community there is an overload of information; however, it is hard to decipher what is true from what is not.

Socially constructed analysis has become an issue because of the vast amount of false information that is being presented and people are blindly believing it. The anecdotes that are being exchanged are ones that instill fear or create drama, rather than taking a more scientific approach and providing factual information. A physician in the Bradford Royal Infirmary commented on the situation he was seeing: “It’s natural for people to want to share any concerns they may have on WhatsApp or on Facebook, Ali Jan Haider concedes, but these messages worry him. ‘My fear is, and my concern is, that quite a few of them could be unfounded, and I’m not even sure if they’re authentic. They could be quite malicious or they could be there just to create panic and trepidation at a time when people are feeling very vulnerable,’” (Wright). During this time people are making more of an appearance on social media and are voicing their thoughts and opinions on subject matters they have no authority on. In apps, like WhatsApp, information is being spread very quickly, and by the time a factual article is published invalidating the information, hundreds of people have forwarded the wrong information to others. Here we see a discrepancy between the kind of anecdotes that provide gossip and entertainment and the ones that are useful information for the scientific community. Campo makes a link between these two by using anecdotal evidence as an invitation to dig deeper. In the Hippocratic Writings, there is an entire section titled the “Fourteen Cases” that is dedicated to scientific anecdotes that provide detailed observations on several different cases. These types of anecdotes are meant to be looked at by other physicians as experiences they can learn from.

This is a time when those who have never really been involved with the scientific community are struggling to understand what is going on. In George Eliot’s Middlemarch, the reader is taken on a journey about love, social life, politics, and even medicine. The book is hard to put down due to the drama and love stories that keep readers engaged, but also articulately weaves in factual information. The character Lydgate is a physician who believes there is great potential for medicine and introduces the idea of medical evidence, which was considered a novel idea at the time. He wants to make improvements in medicine within his lifetime, “he intended to begin in his own case some particular reforms which were quite certainly within his reach…he was wise enough to see that the best security for his practicing honestly according to his belief was to get rid of systematic temptations to the contrary” (Eliot 138). He
continues with reform ideas he has but acknowledges that it will be difficult. Lydgate knows that tradition means a lot to people and changing the way medicine has been done can scare a lot of people into thinking he is a radical. Eliot is skillful in making Lydgate’s points seem reasonable and understandable and wants to convey how historically important the political and scientific/professional reforms of that earlier time were. The book targets an audience that is not normally invested in the scientific community, which provides the general public with basic scientific knowledge. This is similarly accomplished in Rebecca Skloot’s narrative, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. Skloot could not make up for the fact that no one ever informed Henrietta’s family about what was happening; however, she attempts to spread awareness so that no one else will be treated unfairly like this again. She provides readers with some Biology 101 as she explains science in rudimentary terms, “Under the microscope, a cell looks a lot like a fried egg: it has a white (the cytoplasm) that’s full of water and proteins to keep it fed, and a yolk (the nucleus) that holds all the genetic information that makes you you” (Skloot 3). This informs readers who may not have any background in science to follow along and understand the extremity of Henrietta’s situation. Skloot does extensive research in order to simplify it for others and this demonstrates her efforts to educate the Lacks family on what did happen to Henrietta. The use of storytelling has been effective in getting a larger audience to understand science and educate them on necessary topics.

Stories are important in connecting literature to medicine. Rafael Campo inserts anecdotes throughout his writing and, as a physician, realized the great impact it had in this field, “Our patients’ stories too, if only we could listen to them less critically and cynically, might similarly inspire us to the more practically important discoveries of what truly ails them” (Campo). Physicians learn a lot from their patient’s stories and rely on them to determine “what truly ails them.” Anecdotes have been a part of medicine since Hippocrates’ time. In Hippocrates’ “Fourteen Cases” he wrote anecdotes in order to observe patterns and draw conclusions. These anecdotes get compiled and confirmed and eventually become case studies that other doctors can learn from. This is crucial even to this day for doctor visits. Dr. Atul Gawande writes in his novel Being Mortal, about the time when he sat in a geriatrician’s patient visits. The geriatrician “asked her about her day in great detail” and was able to conclude the visit with several notes and suggestions based on the story the patient told the physician (Gawande 39). There is a lot we can learn about a patient’s story and it is beneficial to physicians to gather as much information as possible in order to truly see where the problem is. Epidemiologists and physicians do a lot of questioning, and especially did during the early stages of Coronavirus to determine what was really going on.

John Snow was considered one of the fathers of epidemiology for his relentless efforts in determining the cause of cholera. In my microbiology class this semester we learned about the relentless efforts John Snow went through in order to get to the bottom of the source of the cholera outbreak. His archives confirm this by having accounts from other physicians and medical boards indicating his dedication to his profession. He began by personally asking everyone who had cholera a series of questions about their daily activities, “Dr. Snow conducted a series of valuable personal inquiries for the first seven weeks of the prevalence of the disease, and the results were published...It was only after Dr. Snow had laboured at this task for the period above mentioned, that his inquiries were followed up to end of the epidemic by the Registrar-General” (Matrix). Dr. Snow had evidence for the cause of cholera and was still not believed for a long time. In the 1800’s there was not a lot of knowledge about diseases; however, the miasma theory had been established earlier and stated that “vaporous emanations”, or bad air, were found to be the cause of many other diseases (Paneth). Because this was a predominant theory at the time, both experts and the public were slow to change their minds. The thought of introducing a new theory seemed too drastic and hard for people to believe. This exemplifies the amount of evidence and knowledge that is required by the general public as well as the scientific community in order to be established as a reliable source.

Stories can be hard to believe for physicians because they believe in more concrete evidence. However, the basis of medicine has been rooted in stories. In the times our country is currently facing
there are so many sources of information that are educating the public. We must focus on the facts that are given to us by health care officials and facts that have been repeated constantly such as socially distancing, wearing a mask, washing hands, and so on. Literature is more relevant than ever before in medicine than ever because of the range of information it is providing for us. Rafael Campo makes a powerful statement that perfectly sums up the overall lesson I have learned throughout my literature and medicine course, “No matter how wide the perceived rift between science and the humanities, and no matter what new technologies may deliver unto us in terms of more precise test and life-prolonging therapies, the work of doctors will always necessarily take place at the intersection of science and language” (Campo).
Works Cited


