

Poetry as Health Education Leverage for the Patient, Physician and Public

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ABSTRACT

Poetry is one of the major categories of literature. It is described as literature in meter form characterized by rhythm, rhyme and other figurative expressions. Poetry is an art of communication which is as old as man. The unique property of poetry is that it can be incorporated into the other forms of literature such as prose and drama. Poetry can also be incorporated into mnemonics, acronyms, songs, music, lyrics and jingles which can be read in a manner that provokes giggles or anguish. Poetry is a tool that can be used in any language and in any field, of which medical and health education are inclusive. This review attempts to identify ways in which poetry can be a form of leverage in the promotion of health and increase health awareness to the public, the physician and other health workers as well as the patient and caregivers.

Keywords: Poetry, Health Education, Leverage, Patient, Physician, Public

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is one of the major categories of literature. It is described as literature in meter form characterized by rhythm, rhyme and other figurative expressions. Poetry is an art of communication which is as old as man. The unique property of poetry is that it can be incorporated into the other forms of literature such as prose and drama. Poetry can also be incorporated into mnemonics, acronyms, songs, music, lyrics and jingles which can be read in a manner that provokes giggles or anguish. Poetry is a tool that can be used in any language and in any field, which medical and health education are not excluded. In this modern era poetry is gradually taking an important place in medical education by physicians and non-physicians alike. According to the Oxford Languages Dictionary (2020) education is simply defined as an enlightening experience while health is considered as a state free from injury. Leverage in this context applies to maximum advantage or benefit. A poem is a piece of writing in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by paying particular attention to diction (sometimes involving rhyme), rhythm, and imagery. The physician refers to a qualified and licensed medical doctor, the patient refers to the individual receiving treatment and the public refers to a community. The process of education can take place within formal and an informal setting thus does not necessarily have to be in a classroom setting.

One unique property of poetry is that it can be incorporated into the other forms of literature such as prose and drama and also other art works. As Leonardo daVinci described poetry as painting to be felt rather than seen illustrating the close link between visual arts and poetry (Wolters & Wijnen-Meijer, 2012). Poetry also allows the writer to freely express words as (s) he pleases using both traditional and creative techniques. The use of figures of speech and imagery creates a good way of storytelling or narrative. It could

also give it lyrical and descriptive qualities which makes it easy for poetry to be incorporated into mnemonics, acronyms, songs, music, lyrics and jingles which can be read in a manner that provokes giggles or anguish(Ryan, 2022).

Poets in Medicine

Poets have also shared their own health experiences via poetry. There are several poets that have written poems about medical illnesses and have expressed their feelings on healing in meter form. These have spanned over several decades since the history of man. Ill health is a universal affliction that affects everyone including non- health workers and health workers alike (Salcman, 2012). The poetic cries regarding wellness, sickness and illness could be seen in very ancient works as the Hebrew Bible and Homeric epics. The poem 'Iliad has lines such as '*Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls*' that talks about suffering pain from injury within the entire poem(Homer, 2022).

The Hebrew Bible which is believed to be written by the inspiration of God via prophets and teachers contains poetic books such as Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. There have been poetic descriptions of various ailments in these books as well as others not known as poetic. The book of Job is filled with physical descriptions of Job's ill health, which several physicians have tried to make a definitive diagnosis (De Lima Resende, Kitchner, & Ruiz e Resende, 2009). The book of Exodus describes the plagues consisting of infestations such as lice and gnat (probably mosquitoes), furuncles and sudden death of people as some of the health issues (Knowing Jesus, 2022; Salcman, 2012). Chaucer, Petrarch and Shakespeare were renowned poets of past centuries had also expressed their own encounter with various ailments in their works. Shakespeare's works have been known to reflect depictions of diseases such as infertility, syphilis, scurvy, gout, epilepsy, rheumatism, and venereal disease, as well as several varieties of madness (Morris, 2012; Salcman, 2012). Poems have been used by different persons to express their anger against doctors and other health workers particularly when they have lost hope and trust in their services. Charles Baudelaire a French poet in his poem '*Paris Spleen*' expresses helplessness at the thought of a hospital. Others have used poetry to describe the care given by their doctors such as William Ernest Henley who was poet that had one of his lower limbs amputated due to disseminated tuberculosis; he wrote a poem of gratitude in honour of his doctor Joseph Lister, who is regarded as the father of sepsis. Joseph Lister saved his other leg from the same fate. '*Invictus*' is the name of the poem which has persisted beyond the death of the bearer even into modern age. The name '*Invictus Games*' founded by Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex may have been inspired by this poem. Emily Dickson was also known to write poems on depression and grief. Patients have also been known to write poems in honour of their dead physicians such as Samuel Jackson that wrote about his doctor –Dr. Levit (Salcman, 2012).

Medical students and physicians have also been known to write poems in honour of their medical mentors and tutors as seen in the collection of poems '*Psalms of Infirmary*.' "*The Chambered Nautilus*" and "*In Flanders Field*" are also examples of poems written by doctors about doctors (Poet Physicians, 1945). Physician-poet is a term

that is fast becoming a compound word to describe a person who is a qualified physician and is also dedicated to writing poetry. The person may also have received some level of education in literature at secondary or tertiary level. Poet physician is a term that was used as a title of the collection of poems by physicians in 1945 (Poet Physicians, 1945). Doctor-poet is the name given by Mac-Anthony Uwatse as the pen name of Ekechi Amadi who was then a medical student when she joined Seaview Poetry Club the foremost poetry club in Port Harcourt in 2005. It was a custom then for each poet to have an ‘a.k.a’ (stage name or radio name) as they regularly had recitals on Tuesday at the Silverbird Rhythm 93.7FM Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The term doctor-poet and poet-doctor have been used in describing Rafael Campo (Poetry Foundation, 2022). Stardoc is the name of a budding medic and spoken word poet who is surrounded by siblings that are also doctors (Pendical Admin, 2021). Arthur Canon Doyle was a physician-poet but was more popular for creating the fictional character Sherlock Holmes inspired by the life of another Physician poet- Joseph Bell (Duthie, 2004). Notable physician poets and their works can be seen in the Table below:

Table 1**Prominent Physician-Poets**

Name	Specialty	Notable work	Name	Specialty	Notable Work
John Keats	Surgery	<i>Consumption</i>	Judah Halevi	General physician	<i>That Day While I Had Him</i>
Ryan Petteway	Public Health	<i>TOGETHER (Untethered)</i>	Ipalibo Harry Banigo	Public Health /Dermatology	1968 BBC Student Prize for poetry
William Carlos Williams	Pediatrician	<i>The Red Wheel Barrow</i>	Rafael Campo	Internal Medicine	National Poetry Series (Prize winner)
Oliver Wendell Holmes	Internal Medicine	<i>The Chambered Nautilus</i>	Ekechi Amadi	Dermatology /Geriatrics	<i>Psalms of Infirmary</i>
Arthur Conan Doyle	Surgery	<i>Ode to mortality</i>	Omosivie Odia-Maduka	Public Health	<i>Lord, I Have A cry</i>
Joseph Bell	General Surgery	An amateur poet;	Dabota Yvonne Bouwari	Anesthesia /Emergency Medicine	Third place winner Life Box Poetry Competition
Uche Anyanwagu	Public Health (Epidemiology)	<i>Song to my Soul</i>	Folabi Olumide	Surgery	<i>I Sing...!</i>
Latunde Odeku	Neurosurgery	<i>Twilight: Out of the Night</i>	Dami Ajayi	General practitioner	<i>Clinical Blues</i>
Raphael Ernest Grail	General medicine &	<i>Between the Forest and the Sea</i>	Siham Benchekroun	General Medicine	<i>Oser vivre</i>
Armattoe Anezi Okoro	Anthropology Dermatology	<i>King Kola Nut</i>	Joseph ben Judah	General Medicine	Praise for Maimonides

Table 1 Cont'd

Name	Specialty	Notable work	Name	Specialty	Notable Work
Christian Frederik Louis Leipoldt	Paediatrician	<i>Hertzog Prize for Poetry</i>	Lenrie Leopold Wilfred Peters	Surgery	<i>Satellites</i>
Reward Nsirim	Public Health	<i>Lord I'm Sorry</i>	Ebitsam Elghblwai	Dermatology	<i>How are you doing now?</i>
Ibe Chimezie Chukwuma	Internal Medicine	<i>Save our Docs</i>	Anthony Jatau	Surgery	<i>Kingdom of The Apes</i>

There are several other poets in other health related fields of African descent who have made their mark in poetry as well. They include Makhosazana Xaba (nurse), Diego Odoh Okenyodo (pharmacist) and Amina Said Ali (medical scientist).

Poetry and Health Education

The words 'poem' or 'poems' are not strange to doctors as they are acronyms for a surgical correction procedure for swallowing disorders, a skin disease severity score and a rare multi-systemic affectation (John Hopkins Medicine, 2022; National Organization for Rare Disease, 2021; University of Nottingham, 2022). Doctors are also known to have various collections of poems and have also contributed to various anthologies over the years which cover the various challenges encountered in their lives including that faced in medical practice. Examples of such collection of poems are '*Song To My Soul*' by Uche Anyanwagu (Amazon Publishers, 2022) and '*Lord, I Have A cry*' by Omosive Odia-Maduka. These collections help others see how humane these doctors are and help to portray doctors as human beings who are fallible to sickness and death just like everyone else in the society. Specific collections that focused on medical issues include Ekechi Amadi's '*Psalms of Infirmary*' – A collection that describes medical procedures, various health professionals and diseases (Amadi, 2017). This work happened to be reviewed by both poets and physicians including Victoria Obari Gomba, an endocrinologist whose husband is a renowned poet. Rafael Campo is a poet with several collections on medical related issues and his own experiences in the practice of medicine such as '*Landscape with Human Figure (2002)*' and '*Alternative Medicine (2013)*' (Poetry Foundation, 2022).

Poetry makes a good educational tool that can be used even in the field of medicine. Poetry is being advocated for to be placed in conventional teaching of medical students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels particularly in countries like United States of America (USA), United Kingdom and Australia. A key benefit is the enhancement of empathy. Empathy which is a virtue, is needed to drive doctors and other allied professions to give their best to the care of their patients and encourage patients' caregivers (Davies, 2018; Welbry, 2006; Wolters & Wijnen-Meijer, 2012). Artistic forms of reflection including poetry can promote insight into these emotions improving not just empathy but also cognitive and communication skills (Amadi, 2017; Welbry, 2006). The Medicine and Arts Program is a course offered at the New South Wales, Sydney Australia. It is an 8 year program that allows students to obtain both bachelors of art and of medicine degrees. The aim of this program is to grant these students who are interested

in literary studies while still desirous of becoming doctors the benefits of developing essential skills in both fields since medicine is considered as an art, as well as science (Amadi, 2014; University of New South Wales, 2022).

Sharing experiences have also contributed to adding to one's knowledge. In other to enhance the use of poetry as an educational tool amongst medical students and other health trainees, students are being encouraged to also pick elective courses in the field of literature, reflect on existing art work or a poet's work on any medical theme, write their own feelings about a work and get others to criticize it (Wolters & Wijnen-Meijer, 2012). Limitations also exist when using poetry as a tool for medical education. The major limitation is the ambiguity that results from multiple complex meanings which can arise from the diction of poet which obviously runs parallel to the general scientific approach of where evidence must be derived universally for it to be accepted as the truth; nevertheless poetry can improve medical education by highlighting observational skills, creating powerful psychological insight and strengthening emotional intellect (Welbry, 2006). Felicia Eke, a professor in Pediatric Nephrology made use of a poem '*Making wee, wee*' as sung by another professor in Pediatrics- Maurice Kibel, in her inaugural lecture which made it understandable and appreciable to all that could read English language (Eke, 2006).

Poetry is increasingly been used in medical teachings to stimulate physicians and other health workers to describe their work experience and even to teach students. The Cleveland Clinic at Ohio in USA is known to organize poetry evenings where people including physicians, potential physicians to be (medical students), patients and the public are free to share their poems and stories about sickness and loss of loved ones. This serves as a way of educating all on how to relief emotions that comes with the strain of caring for an ill loved one or when the demise of a loved one occurs (Insight, 2019). Poetry can be used as health leverage, giving the beneficiary the advantage of expressing their own thoughts as well as being taught by other people's experiences (Amadi, 2014; Zarei, 2021). Poetry can be used as a universal form of expression with no age, cultural, gender or religious bias. It can give voice to the voiceless either passively or actively when poets speak on general or global issues that affects human beings or animals or the sufferer expressing their hurt or happiness as they transcend from a state of ill health to health and vice versa (Carroll, 2005).

Arts in Medicine Project is a partnership program with other organizations such as the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) and United States Consulate General which is based on the belief that the use of various form of art including poetry can uplift the spirit of sick children thus improving health outcomes such as decreased anxiety, increased pain tolerance and shorter length of stay in hospitals (Arts in Medicine Project, 2019). Yewande Omotosho, a Barbadian- born Nigerian novelist who is based in South Africa utilizes poetry as a form of medicine for loss (Edoro, 2014). Poetry can be used in this context to deal with the sadness and void one feels with the loss of a loved one. Poetry was used as a means of communication between a chronically ill patient and Ofole Mgbako an African-American internist and infectious disease specialist who was caring for the patient. This was found to be very healing and made him to reflect in his memoir

“*In some ways, writing was the best treatment*” (Mgbeko, 2021). In the appraisal of the ‘Twilight: Out of the Night’ a collection of poems written by Latunde Odeku, Nigeria’s foremost neurosurgeon, the appraiser talked about the travails and prevailing success of this physician-poet despite being a diabetic patient himself (Omobawale, 2008).

Poetry and Medicine are a special feature by the Journal of American Medical Association that focuses on poetry that relates the experiences of patients and physicians regarding the state of wellness or illness (Poetry and Medicine, 2022). Other journals that accept literary works such as poetry, prose essays and fine art which focuses on various aspects of medicine include Annals of Internal Medicine, American Nursing Journal, The British Medical Journal, Health Affairs and America Medical Writers Association (Ali, 2019). There are other literary journals whose sole focus is on health education. These journals include *Ars Medica*, *The Awakenings Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Dermanities*, *Narrateur* and *Pulse* (Melason, 2019). Hippocrates Initiative for Poetry and Medicine (HIPM) is one of the biggest prize events in poetry and medicine that was initiated by Donald Singer, a cardiologist and Michael Hulse, a poet. It is an annual event with entries in different categories from people from different parts of the globe (HIPM, 2022). Rafael Campo is a multi-award prize winner with the *National Poetry Series* (1994), *Sheila Motton Book Prize from the New England Poetry Club* and *Lambda Literary Award*, all to his pen and scalpel. The love for poetry has never been forgotten by Ipalibo Harry Banigo the poet who became a physician and then a politician later in life. She won the 1968 BBC award for Students Poetry Prize. She has consistently supported younger poets to continue in the art (National Network, 2019; Tide Newspaper, 2022). Dabota Yvonne Bouwari is an internationally recognized poet and physician from Nigeria who won the third place for *Life Box Poetry Prize* on the theme ‘*Safe Surgery, Save Lives*’ (Amadi, 2015; ETHOS, 2021). The *Onari Brown Poetry Prize* was named after the patron of Seaview Poetry Club, was sponsored by the first female president of the club who is also a physician. The prize is awarded to school children who reside in rural areas in Rivers state who do well in writing poems (Seaview Poetry Club, 2022). The award of prizes for medically inclined poems seems to be increasing in developed countries such as USA, United Kingdom and Australia but poetry in general is yet to be extensively appreciated by medical personnel in Nigeria. Raphael Ernest Grail Armattoo, a renowned Ghanaian doctor who was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize in physiology and medicine was also known to win poetry prizes (Ulster History Circle, 2008).

Poetry as a form of communication is already becoming readily accepted by major public health care journals, including the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), which has a section devoted to poetry and medicine (School of Public Health, 2022). Research poetics is a form of arts-based research method, can be utilized in health promotion by transcribing spoken words into written form in verses. It helps in public health awareness because it leverages on the ability to maintain participants’ voices who may be hospice patients or clinic clients, crystallizing their narratives, deepening the intimate connection between them and the public (Nichols, Biederman & Gringle, 2015).

There are several poetry clubs in Nigeria but the Seaview Poetry Club is one of the very few who are medically inclined. They follow a calendar guide of world events that include health awareness days which they recite poems regarding the specific health issues mainly in English language and occasionally in different vernacular of the Niger Delta region. This has inspired many doctors as fans who themselves are budding poets such as Maureen Maduagwu (Public Health Physician) and Edward Ikpa (Family Health Physician) to listen to their poems rendered on the Tuesday Morning drive at Rhythm 93.7FM and participate in the club's poetic activities (Amadi, 2014). The club has two anthologies- 'Meeting Minds' that has a section tagged 'Health and Wealth' and 'Colours of the Creeks' with the theme of environmental health in the Niger Delta region (Seaview Poetry Club, 2022). Poetry has been effectively used to convey to the public about safety measures to take during this COVID pandemic era (African Renewal, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The unique features of poetry make it a useful tool in educating the public who could be patients at some point of their lives on various health issues. It is also an effective leverage in stimulating empathy amongst physicians to care more for their patients. Poetry is applicable to every language and can be used to as a means of communicating complex themes to the general public in a way that is appealing and understandable.

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