Overview of Brown’s Unique 8-year Program in Liberal Medical Education (PLME)

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GUEST EDITOR

I am guest editing this month’s and next month’s editions of the Rhode Island Medical Journal (RIMJ) because I felt the need to share with the greater RI medical community some of the lesser-known aspects of Brown University’s eight-year baccalaureate-MD program, the Program in Liberal Medical Education (PLME) and the Alpert Medical student’s journey into medicine. As the Associate Dean of Medicine for PLME, I have the privilege of interacting with these students for eight years – the most formative years of their lives. I have included works that are scientific, reflective and creative from the PLMEs as well as Alpert Medical students who entered via the “standard route” of admissions.

This effort is dedicated to former Dean of Medicine David Greer, MD, whose vision created the PLME. His passing was a great loss to medicine, society and many of us personally; may this tribute be fitting of his legacy.

First, a brief history: in 1985, Dean David Greer and the then Associate Dean of Medical Education, Stephen Smith, created the PLME. They wished to accept the “best” high school students who would utilize Brown, and the College’s unique Open Curriculum to craft their own educational paths. These individualized educational plans would allow students to pursue their passions be they in science or liberal arts but always with the view of medicine as a humanitarian pursuit, not a “trade” to be learned. Each PLME has always worked with an adviser to choose courses as well as activities during the academic year and summers that would allow them to fully develop personally, academically and professionally.

I focused on three specific areas to highlight in this edition of the RIMJ: first the “liberal” aspect of the PLME, through our special courses, preclinical electives, creative writing and reflection. This section culminates specifically with a piece from the Student Health Council which often helps students as they delve deeply into being a healthy, well-balanced, future physician. One of Brown’s core competencies has always been self-awareness and the ability to develop professionally and these pieces are a small representation of how our students find their values.

Next, in Part 2 in the August RIMJ, I provide a current synopsis of our Brown medical international “exchange” programs. Dr. Greer was very active internationally as he felt the United States could learn a great deal from other nations. He was recognized with the Nobel Peace prize for his international work. And finally, I have included scientific research pieces that our students have written highlighting another core competency, lifelong learning. All Brown’s PLME and AMS students are intellectually curious, strive for academic rigor and look to solve ongoing problems in the world. A quick note: these pieces were all voluntarily submitted when I sent out a general call for student participation. These are not necessarily representative of all the students’ work but those who chose to share.

As the AMS and PLME strive to provide opportunities to broaden our student’s perspective in caring for their patients, there are specific pre-clinical electives and now a new PLME course: Creative Decision Making, for students to take. The Creative Decision Making course is co-lead by one of our dedicated Medical Humanities faculty, Dr. Jay Baruch. He partnered with Rhode Island School of Design Museum Curator and Educator, Hollis Mikey, first in offering a pre-clinical elective in Medical Humanities and now a full-fledged course, Creative Dimensions of Medical Decision-Making, whose expressed mission is: to “think about how we think…to reflect on our habits of mind — how they shape our perceptions, interpretations, and critical decisions. Even in circumstances of complex problem solving, we are frequently unconscious of how and why we make the decisions we do; the assumptions made, the cognitive shortcuts taken, the narrative structure imposed.” Emphasis will be placed on examining “Uncertainty and mystery which are critical dimensions of medicine. Rigorous out-of-the-box thinking and reflective skills which make for efficacious diagnosis and treatment cannot be acquired by leafing through books or staring at the pixels of PowerPoints; thus students will engage with creativity as ways to meet the challenges of medical practice.” This and other medical humanities efforts are supported by Dr. Fred Schiffman and our local Gold Humanism Society chapter and Brown’s Creative Arts Council, from whom I received a grant in support of the course.

This course follows the fall semester PLME senior seminar which is an interdisciplinary and integrative science course that supplements the preparation of PLME for the study of medicine in the 21st century. The PLME Senior seminar which I lead uses a case-based approach to relevant
and contemporary subjects in medicine and health care, such as biological systems and their interactions, mechanisms of intra- and intercellular communication, drug therapy optimization, and humanistic aspects of patient care as well as addressed the social, behavioral and ethical contexts of health care in context of health care economics. One of the most important parts of the course is narrative reflection. As the course leader for this class, I highly encourage our students to be self-reflective and approach medicine empathically through these reflections. The first writings presented here are three reflections for the semester. After the student's submit, I respond to each student individually pushing them to think more deeply, challenging them and encouraging them to shift from their own lifelong learning to caring for patients. Our Associate Dean of Medical Education, Dean Allan Tunkel has been extremely supportive of these efforts as was former Associate Dean of Medicine Philip Gruppuso.

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