

Montaigne wrote: "Fear of death is the cause of all our vices." This is most certainly true for the vices of medicine which has such difficulty in learning when to stop – and recognising the point at which futility slides into cruelty. We all of us – doctors and other healthcare professionals just as much as anyone else – we all of us struggle to cope with the fundamental existential challenge of finding meaning within the human universals of suffering, loss and death. It is no wonder perhaps that we resort so often to our increasingly sophisticated biotechnical means rather than paying real attention to the care of the dying as one of the core purposes of medicine. Medicine is in a mess because we have begun to regard death as medical failure rather than the inevitable culmination of every life. We have prioritised theory over practice, the disease over the experience of the patient, and number over description. My contention is that the arts can pay a huge role in redressing this balance.

When serious, life threatening disease is diagnosed, the systematic application of biomedical science, of generalised truths derived from the study of populations, becomes the primary focus of the healthcare team, but when there is no longer any hope of improvement and the disease is winning, it is essential that the focus shifts, once again, back to the unique suffering individual - to see the person again, to rehear and rediscover their individual story, their achievements, hopes and fears. This is the point at which, for me, literature and perhaps poetry in particular becomes hugely helpful because, as all great writers demonstrate, finding meaning in the story of a life is an act of creation.

In the care of the dying, healthcare professionals require five dimensions of literacy: medical, physical, emotional, moral and, most relevant to today, cultural. Yet, the importance of cultural literacy is almost completely ignored in most medical education in this country and so young doctors are deprived of the most potent resource for making sense of both life and death. Indeed, it is made very clear to young people wanting to be doctors that only science is important from the age of 14 onwards. This is a tragedy for the care of the dying and the bereaved.