

The Mind of an Artist

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To me, the realms of science and art are not separate islands in isolation, but polar ends of a continuum. Though medicine revolves around the sciences of the human body, we also recognise the impact of psychological and sociological factors in clinical practice.

Not that illnesses are primarily psychosomatic, or that there is no veritable truth in science, but clinical medicine is in reality the artistic practice of an applied science, and is fraught with the inexactness of estimation, the incompleteness of data, the constraints of scarcity and the unknowns of unknowns. Qualitatively, the healing arts are coloured by the lenses of subjective interpretation by both clinicians and patients alike.

The influence of technology

The arrival of the information age and the concomitant rise of artificial intelligence (AI) are two of the most transformational forces shaping our training and practice of medicine.

With the trove of research papers, guidelines, practice manuals, surgical

videos and drug lists at our fingertips through apps, web and cloud, we are supercharged with data. While the memorisation of diagnostic criteria, clinical algorithms and step-by-step procedures consumed the bulk of our mental powers before, we are now able to be more observationally receptive, cognitively critical, imaginatively creative and linguistically communicative. Traditionally, these mental faculties have been the stronghold of the artistic mind, whose inculcation has been unfairly relegated to an afterthought by doctors. But with AI threatening to supplant us, by sheer computing supremacy in linear algorithm processing, brute data recall and chilling calculatedness in probability permutation, it is necessary for all doctors to distinguish their minds to retain existential relevance. They cannot remain complacent, for they could soon be facing the challenges posed by an autonomous machine that functions with eerie unerring precision.

Evidently, the acquisition of an artistic mindset is no longer a *Hamletesque* choice but a resolution we must undertake for our survival.

Machinations of the artistic mind

Of an artistic mind, in addition to that listed above, we refer unreservedly to the development of intuition and instinct, sensitivity and awareness, and a preference for more design and aesthetics over mere utility and function. Worshipped as much in symphony is cacophony, equilibrium and chaos, perpetuity and disruption – the artistic orientation is opening your mind to all diverse domains, learning everything from the simple to the complex, and trusting that the knowledge and skill

acquired in one field will in time be translatable and transplantable in another. A healthy dose of inquisitiveness and gumption in testing the assumptions of convention and establishment is to be celebrated.

For it is in all things non-linear and speculative, with all parts seemingly nonsensical and jarring, that the holistic fitness of sensibility and beauty will emerge. Perhaps nothing save that which is wholly utilitarian and discretely measurable can be completely mastered by the artificial mind.

For medicine to remain a noble profession, doctors must manifest the best of the human spirit. In empathy and compassion, passion and love, faith and belief – we hold true to the inspiring qualities of our soul. Through the arts, we appreciate these same qualities that would come to define us: the heroism of the persistent man, the tragedy of the man who gives his all yet fails, and the dash and deployment of humour, irony, sarcasm and hyperbole in art. The poignancy of these narrative archetypes and artistic accoutrements are only palpable and appreciable against our background of inevitable mortality and of traditions and cultures honed over a millennium of blood, sweat and tears.

Blending medicine and art

As a doctor I found the clinical practice of medicine, though engaging in parts, insufficiently nourishing for my soul. There were big questions relating to the world, life and myself that needed answering. Managing patients where life and death was a stroke away was serious business. Clinical practice demanded my presence of mind to ensure that the best

was done for the patient, with no room for grave error.

The arts – visual, literary and its interdisciplinary domains – was the perfect avenue for me to tap into the well of human consciousness and query my at times inspiring and devastating emotional fragmentations. Every piece of work that I create is an expression in my own voice by my own hand. Through the frame of my work, the audience can see through my eyes. Art-making – its process from inspirational inception, exhaustive execution, to infusion of public consciousness – was altogether a relatively riskless activity that was non-judgemental but open to interpretation. Provided I sidestep from politically provocative issues, I was safe in my crafted personae as a doctor and an artist, which were mutually exclusive or insufferably inseparable, depending on how one chooses to view it.

Medicine and its clinical practice were, of course, a fertile ground for philosophical inquiry and artistic questioning. Trained as a licentiate and a fellow at the venerated Royal College of Surgeons of England, I bore the halo of an esteemed expert in the biological and pathological workings of the human body. What better way to uniquely position myself in a saturated field of professional artists than as one who would investigate the particularities and peculiarities of the human condition in diseased and high-performance settings? To say I was opportunistic would be missing the mark, for I had found the natural genesis of the human body too marvellous to disregard and the discourse of the post-human condition too inflammatory to ignore.

Making art out of medicine

For the 1995 work *Biotics*, I arrayed pharmaceutical bottles of steroids and antibiotics in a sculptural aluminium cast installation evocative of military armamentarium, in postulation of a future when we would have ready access to enhancements. In 1996, I created a Swift digital work, *Biotechnoethics*, that manifested and dematerialised axioms in a screen of darkness. *The Robot Thinks Therefore He is*, *Matching Programs Exchange Their Code*, and *Immortality Makes Hoarding Power Worthwhile* were among the texts that questioned the parallels between sentience of artificial and human intelligences, the procreativity of machines with

familial characteristics, and the societal implications of infinite life extension.

Moleculux – Luminescent Bodies in Hyperspace was a vast outdoor assembly of scalable, mutable light structures that I fabricated for Sculpture Square in 2002. Autofluorescence, additive synthesis of coloured light and concave reflectivity in the generation of virtual imaginary were among the optical and ophthalmological principles that I employed in the work. Around 2003, I was appointed the arts consultant for Biopolis and was commissioned the work *Pantheon – Innards of Consciousness*, where I illustrated the human body on multiple overlays of suspended transparent sheets in poses that displayed the contemplative and the spiritual man. The tiny spacing between the sheets, each in barely perceptible motion, rendered a depth of stereopsis to the viewer. Understanding the visual sciences, and how perception was hard-wired and influenced by surroundings and context, sharpened my edge in artistic practice.

Whether the life of the artist and/or the clinician is akin to the fate of conjoined twins or the tall tale of two-faced Janus, it depends on which of the duo is momentarily ascendant or complementarily subsumed in the eternal cycle of yin and yang.

Nonetheless, the influence of the artist in me is irrepressible, even if I were to remain incarcerated in the windowless cell that is my clinic.

Artistically influenced medical practice

How positively a surgical outcome is viewed by patients is relative to their expectations, which I skilfully set. How satisfactory a consultation is perceived by patients is imbued by the pleasantness of the interaction which I control.

I cannot recall how often the soft whisper of clinical acumen has nudged me to save the day. The times when I only had the sixth sense of feeling to guide my hands in the fog of surgery testify to the utility of artistry. My halcyon student days spent drawing and doodling aimlessly on white margins of textbooks, amid the teacher's monotonous monologue, have surprisingly (or unsurprisingly) drilled a hand that is calibrated for the fine art of microsurgery. And blessedly, my eye for beauty – that perceptive sense of

aptness of proportion, balance and line – has lifted the outcome of functional eyelid surgeries to be aesthetically heavenly, and traumatic wound repairs to be cosmetically acceptable. My deference to first principles and tireless questioning of assumptions have enabled me to reason better in the running of my private practice.

Without the artistic mindset, I would not have strayed from my comfort zone, charging into areas that would have arrested a dilettante of lesser conviction and purpose. I would not have devised the Doctors Online portal for Sembawang Media or conceived the LifeMedic emergency medical records in the nascent days of the internet. The Assisi Hospice would not have seen my opined contributions to the development committee's evaluation of its architectural design and oversight of its construction.

Revealing the hidden artist within

Learning from the revelations of my journey as both a clinician and artist, it would not be exaggerative for me to state categorically that doctors are all somewhat conceptual and performance artists. The artistic mindset, and its bond with the human spirit, can no longer stay hidden in the inner recesses of our minds. It is every doctor's tool in daily clinical practice and our best offence against the looming threat of redundancy brought on by the impending singularity of AI and the inexorable march of robots.

Only with the artist in us can we be masters of technology, and not its unwitting slaves. Only with the human spirit in force can we have a better tomorrow, for the best is yet to come in the brave new world beyond. ◀

Legend

1. Yearning – a three-dimensional photo work
2. The Contemplative Man – from Pantheon – Innards of Consciousness on plexiglass sheets

