

Michael J. Leach Reviews *Doctor Poets and Other Healers: COVID in their Own Words Poems & Personal Essays* Edited by Thelma T. Reyna, Ph.D., Frank L Meyskens, Jr., MD, FACP and Johanna Shapiro, MA, Ph.D

There is an ancient yet enduring connection between healthcare and literature. In Ancient Greece, where Hippocrates of Kos laid the foundations for modern medicine, Apollo became known as the god of healing and diseases as well as other domains, including poetry. Since that era, there have been innumerable physician writers and poets—medical practitioners or doctors who have penned prose or poetry outside of their ‘day jobs’. As the number of recognised health professions has increased over time, so too have the range of different health professionals engaging with the literary arts. In an informative preface to *Doctor Poets and Other Healers: COVID in their Own Words* (henceforth referred to as ‘*Doctor Poets and Other Healers*’), co-editor Dr Johanna Shapiro names several famous doctor poets before highlighting the relatively recent growth of medical writing:

Physicians have always written, and some of them have written poetry (Chekhov, Keats, William Carlos Williams, and Mikhail Bulgakov come to mind). In the 20th and 21st centuries, physician writing has proliferated, with many physicians recognized as popular writers and many medical journals publishing personal narratives and poetry.

This ‘proliferation’ has occurred alongside the rise of a broad interdisciplinary field: the health or medical humanities. Health/medical humanities combines healthcare with a range of humanities, arts, and social science disciplines, including literature, in an effort ‘to develop and nurture skills of observation, analysis, empathy, and self-reflection—skills that are essential for humane healthcare.’ [1]

Many print anthologies contain health-related poetry and/or prose written by health professionals, carers, patients, and others. These include *Articulations: The Body and Illness in Poetry* [2], *A Body of Work: An Anthology of Poetry and Medicine* [3], and annual editions of *The Hippocrates Prize Anthology* published over 2010-2021 [4]. *Doctor Poets and Other Healers* stands out from earlier anthologies in that it focusses on a particular time in healthcare history, the coronavirus disease-19 (COVID-19) pandemic, and includes pieces written almost exclusively by health professionals.

This innovative and important anthology arose from a University of California, Irvine (UCI) event held in February 2022, namely the *5th Annual Symposium on Poetry of Hope and Healing: Health Practitioners’ Reflections on Loss, Grief and Resilience*. The event featured readings of poems and personal essays—pieces that went on to form the basis of *Doctor Poets and Other Healers*. The event organisers are none other than the three co-editors of this anthology: award-winning writer and poet Dr Thelma T. Reyna, Distinguished Professor of Medicine Emeritus Dr Frank L. Meyskens, and Professor Emerita of Family Medicine, Dr Johanna Shapiro. Dr Shapiro is also the Founder-Director of the Program in Medical Humanities & Arts at the UCI School of Medicine. Collectively, the co-editors bring a wealth of relevant expertise to the anthology. This most certainly shows, page after page.

Doctor Poets and Other Healers is a 130-page book containing 78 pages of well-chosen poetry and personal essays. These pieces are arranged in alphabetical order of author surname rather than by theme, making for gripping reading whereby one never knows quite what to expect next. This arrangement mirrors the unwavering uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic while, nonetheless, managing to maintain an overall sense of cohesion and

interplay. Of all 51 pieces included in the anthology, 42 (82%) are poems while 9 (18%) are short personal essays. The poems are mostly free-verse pieces, with a smaller proportion written in traditional forms such as the sestina and pantoum. The 51 poems and personal essays were written by 26 authors from the United States (US). Consistent with the 'Health Professional' section of the *2021 Hippocrates Prize Anthology* [5], there are more female (20 or 77%) than male (6 or 23%) authors in *Doctor Poets and Other Healers*. Collectively, 15 medical practitioners (including Dr Meyskens, Jr and Dr Shapiro) and 2 medical students accounted for nearly two-thirds of the 26 authors. The remaining third of authors had various professional backgrounds: chaplaincy, clinical psychology, holistic health, medical administration, nursing, virology research, and social work. There is also one retiree and part-time carer who previously worked in human resource economics, providing the anthology with a distinct voice. In keeping with the location of the aforementioned symposium, the vast majority of the authors (24 or 92%) hailed from California while only two (8%) were from other US states: Rhode Island and Texas. One of the Californian authors lived and worked in New York early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, California has been among the hardest hit of all US states. Indeed, in April 2021, California overtook New York as the US state with the highest number (but not rate) of deaths attributable to COVID-19, averaging 433 COVID-19 deaths per day over a given week [6]. This may help explain why mortality is such a major theme explored by the primarily California-based contributors to *Doctor Poets and Other Healers*. In her poem 'Daimon', Dr Gabriella Miotto uses metaphorical language to reflect on the pervasive, everyday nature of death:

Death and beauty share the same table
always every day sometimes sitting 6 feet apart
sometimes
in each other's laps.

These poignant lines speak to the juxtaposition of death and beauty elsewhere in the anthology: the beautiful imagery and spaciousness of nurse Stacy Nigliazzo's poem 'When they ask how he died I tell them'; the emotive lines of Dr Steven T. Rosen's elegy to his characterful 'Uncle Lenny' as well as his elegant visual poem 'The End?'; the powerful essays 'Grateful for time' and 'I Lost My Sister to COVID' by Dr Shannon Zhang and Dr Lorna Rodriguez-Rodriguez, respectively. Dr Zhang's essay contains a memorable paragraph about truly caring for a patient dying from stage IV pancreatic cancer:

As days went by, I found myself wanting to stay longer with her during my pre-rounds. Most days, she slept as I held her hand and removed excess gauzes and bandages on her upper extremities as she complained about their discomfort. Despite my head running with the "to do's" of that day and her unwillingness to engage in conversation with me due to fatigue, I stayed with her as she slept peacefully. We invited her family to come visit, transitioned her to home hospice, and set her up for discharge.

Dr Rodriguez-Rodriguez's essay, meanwhile, describes her visceral and cerebral reaction to learning of her sister's COVID-induced multiple organ failure:

His email caused me a sudden grief that was piercing and intense, so intense that it numbed my body and yet left my mind completely clear, with an undeniable perfect knowledge of what was happening and what was to come.

The focus of the poems in *Doctor Poets and Other Healers* is not always death; some poems and personal essays are somewhat more positive and hopeful. In stark contrast to the pieces about death, clinical psychologist Lisa C. Krueger's poem 'Origami Night' concludes with the reassuringly repetitive lines 'I hear her breathe – // I breathe – / we are breathing –'. Dr Miotto's 'Love in the Time of COVID-19 ...a pantoum' conveys her hope:

...to be sheltered by the language of the birds
while *il medico della peste*¹ wears the N95 this time around
and the heart of one who returned from near-extinction
watches us make green pesto and music for one another

In her poem 'In Praise of Home School', retiree and carer Anna Dunlap manages to find a bittersweet benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic:

This stretch of isolation conjures
images from childhood, when time
was a pleasure to kill – swaying
in a hammock of faded quilts, absorbed
in the lackadaisical dance of clouds,
casements of mind open wide.

Some say shelter-at-home is a wasteland
of boredom bathed in cathode rays
of ruminating on things long hid—
slackened bonds of coupledness,
slender reeds of habit,
how family depletes us.

I say—we are being home-schooled.
The world has been too fast,
too loud, too much for too long.
We are blinking, peering at the
frightened eyes of the front-line,
the carnage of the microscopic
the myth of endless progress.

Praise the lesson: earth is not ours.
We are not master of anything.

Elsewhere, Dr Meyskens, Jr. reflects on the 'infinite variety of hugs' available to humans throughout his feelgood poem 'Connections'. In the context of this ongoing pandemic, the positivity of 'Connections' is tempered by an undercurrent of danger related to the risk of COVID-19 transmission as well as a certain wistfulness for pre-pandemic life. The hugs described here have become even more valuable in recent years.

Among the most striking pieces in *Doctor Poets and Other Healers* are those in which health professionals move to the opposite side of the practitioner-patient relationship. In an essay titled 'COVID Can't Stop Me', for example, Dr Carol Grabowski describes her lived experience of COVID-19 in a clinical yet personal fashion, likening it to living with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

Three days later, my test result came back positive. I tried to get monoclonal antibodies, but my hospital wasn't set up for these infusions at that time. Fortunately, however, my symptoms remained mild, and my appetite and sense of smell soon returned. It was a tremendous relief to learn that by Day 6, COVID symptoms in most people have peaked, as was true in my case. I was grateful that I never went to ICU or needed a ventilator. But I remain cautious, foregoing my spontaneous weekend outings and still masking in indoor places. I consciously focus on what I *can* do rather than focusing always on what I *can't* do. It feels somewhat like PTSD.

This essay recalls one of the main aims of health/medical humanities—empathy. Fittingly, Dr Shapiro calls for greater empathy in healthcare at the end of her confronting poem ‘These Are Your Doctors’, imploring patients to ‘See yourself in them / Then maybe they will see / themselves in you’. As with all great poems, ‘These Are Your Doctors’ leaves the reader with much to contemplate.

All in all, *Doctor Poets and Other Healers* is a unique, insightful anthology of poetry and prose produced by a multi-talented editorial team. It builds on past anthologies of health professionals’ writing by capturing moments from, and reflections on, an extraordinary time in healthcare history. This book is important not just for its literary merit; it also has considerable historical and sociological significance.

Endnote:

1. The term ‘*il medico della peste*’ is Italian for ‘the plague doctor’.

References:

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5. Hulse, Michael & Donald Singer (Eds.). *The Hippocrates Prize 2021: Winning and Commended Poems*. The Hippocrates Press, 2021.
6. Fuller, Thomas. *California, Beseiged by Virus for Months, Has Most Deaths in U.S.*, 2021. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/02/09/world/covid-19-coronavirus> [Accessed 12 August 2022].