THE VOICES OF THE MEDICAL RECORD

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ABSTRACT. The medical record, as a managerial, historic, and legal document, serves many purposes. Although its form may be well established and many of the cases documented in it 'routine' in medical experience, what is written in the medical record nevertheless records decisions and actions of individuals. Viewed as an interpretive 'text', it can itself become the object of interpretation. This essay applies literary theory and methodology to the structure, content, and writing style(s) of an actual medical record for the purpose of exploring the relationship between the forms and language of medical discourse and the daily decisions surrounding medical treatment. The medical record is shown to document not only the absence of a consistent treatment plan for the patient studied but also a breakdown in communication between different health professionals caring for that patient. The paper raises questions about the kind of education being given to house staff in this instance. The essay concludes with a consideration of how such situations might be more generally avoided.

Key words: communication, decision-making, graduate medical education, medical history taking, medical records

INTRODUCTION

The medical record, steeped in professional language, is a somewhat schizophrenic document. It serves many purposes: it is a legal document, it gives pertinent information in the medical management of patients, and it serves as a record for those caring for the patient in the future. All this conspires to make the medical record a difficult document to analyze or criticize. Because of its important functions in recording the course of a patient and, it can be argued, in playing some role in what that course will be, the medical record deserves to be looked at by those trying to understand medicine today.

The hospital medical record is, first of all, a working document, an organized repository of information gathered during the extent of a patient’s clinic visits and hospitalizations. It serves as a source of past and present information to enable physicians to make informed decisions about diagnosis and treatment. Obviously, not all details of all encounters between a patient and the writers in a medical chart are recounted in that document [1]. Furthermore, because the medical record is a legal document, health professionals repeatedly insist that
they must be selective about what information they include in the chart.

In short, the medical record, while steeped in medical traditions of both language and form, is a deliberately ‘crafted’ document. Although the established form of the medical interview or the nearly universal use of some medical protocols make many medical ‘cases’ somewhat predictable, what is written in the medical record – as well as the actions documented by that record – still reflect some degree of individual choice and judgment. Those choices reflect the knowledge and preferences of their writer; that is, the medical record reflects each contributor’s interpretation of the condition and situation of the patient whose care is being documented.

If the content of the medical record reflects its writers’ medical interpretations, then a reader of that record should be able to identify those interpretations. This assumption reflects both medical theorists who assert that the practice of medicine is an interpretive activity [2–5] and literary theorists who believe that a writer’s beliefs are inevitably inscribed within his or her writing. This essay adopts those premises and approaches the exercise of identifying the interpretive nature of the medical record through contemporary literary theory. From there, because medicine must always ultimately move from theory to practice, we consider how this understanding of the medical record is of use to practitioners.

BAKHTIN AND NOVELISTIC DISCOURSE

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian literary theorist who wrote extensively about the novelistic form. His description of the novel encourages comparison to the medical record when he says, “The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” ([6], p. 261). He speaks of the novel as “a diversity of social speech types … and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” ([6], p. 262). The medical record has its parallel in the diversified voices of physicians, nurses, social workers, dietitians, and all health professionals who write in the medical chart. Their notes are entered into the chart in a prescribed way, producing an organized record with a familiar sequence of information and events. All of these groups, on the surface, share the same goals of patient care and appear to speak a shared bioscientific language – Bakhtin’s “social speech type”. Each group, however, addresses in the language particular concerns that reflect the unique philosophy and skills of that professional group. The “diversity of voices” of which Bakhtin writes can be compared to the individual health professionals who write in the chart. When he writes of different “linguistic levels” in the novel (such as dialogue, letters, or authorial narration) which are “subject to different stylistic controls” ([6], p. 261), one can point out various styles or linguistic levels in the medical record,