

Of poetry and science

By Dana Cook Grossman

I've always been fond of clipping and filing—literally in decades past, and electronically in more recent years—thoughtful quotations. (I recently learned that one of my great-aunts published a book of quotations and snippets of poetry that she found especially insightful, so the propensity may be familial.) Sometimes, when I'm looking for inspiration for this column or some other piece of writing, I'll prowl through what amounts to my own personal "Familiar Quotations."

I was doing so recently and paused on one clipping that is actually *not* very familiar but that makes an important enough point that I decided to make it a little bit more familiar—at least among the readership of DARTMOUTH MEDICINE.

The quote I paused on was from a speech that Donna Shalala gave in 1996, when she was the U.S. secretary of health and human services. She said: "It's not enough to just train the best scientists; every citizen in America must be scientifically literate. . . . For that to happen, we must write the poetry of science in the prose that the American people can understand."

The observation resonated with me because that is exactly what we try to do in DARTMOUTH MEDICINE—make science and medicine both interesting and accessible. That includes, for example, writing about a novel drug trial (see page 3) in a way that helps our lay readers understand the subtleties of such research. Or writing about how tumor cells use dietary fat (see page 4) in a way that's intelligible to both a 65-year-old pediatrician and a 35-year-old cardiologist. Or writing about a comparison between psychotherapy and medication to treat depression (see page 7) in a way that appeals to a biochemist or a physiologist.

In addition, we aim to focus on the innate beauty of biochemistry or physiology—let's just say *nature*—in a way that will resonate with everyone (see page 64). And to illuminate the human side of medicine (see page 25). And to explore the progression of medical and scientific thought through history (see page 36). That's because these are issues that affect every single one of us.

And there are many other ways beyond this magazine in which Dartmouth heeds Shalala's advice.

For example, since 1998, the Dartmouth Community Medical School (DCMS) has offered lec-

tures on a variety of topics, from "The New Thinking About Aging" to the most recent series—"Is Modern Society Killing Us?"—which featured sessions on insomnia, obesity, addiction, and other threats to our health. Hundreds of attendees each year, from eager teenagers to retirees not ready to stop learning, sign up for DCMS.

Dartmouth-Hitchcock also offers a broad array of health-education classes and support groups—many of them free—on subjects ranging from cardiopulmonary resuscitation to tai chi, memory loss to smoking cessation.

And DMS is the lead institution on a federal grant that is bringing sophisticated scientific expertise to eight undergraduate schools statewide.

In these and many other ways, Dartmouth has long aimed not just to "train the best scientists"—whether physicians or bioengineers, physiologists or health-policy statisticians—but also to do its part to nurture a scientifically literate citizenry.

For none of the well-educated scientists holding Dartmouth degrees will be able to do their work if they aren't serving a populace that understands why the nation must continue to fund novel drug trials. Or how science advances by learning ever more about the way tumor cells use dietary fat. Or what is gained by doing a meta-analysis of psychotherapy and antidepressant medications.

As for the beautiful artwork and the touching essays, those are, in the end, what this institution is *really* about—that is, serving people. Making the practice of medicine more rewarding for doctors. Making the advancement of science more thrilling for researchers. Bringing ever-better care to patients, and helping all of us to become better consumers of health care.

I hope Donna Shalala meant to wrap all of those ideas up in the phrase "the poetry of science." I hope she meant to counter the sad fact that poetry and science are two disciplines that somehow have been made to seem abstruse to all too many people. For are any disciplines more central to the human condition—poetry in a figurative sense and science very literally? If, through these pages, we can help just one person see science in a new light, or consider illness and health through the lens of poetry, that will be rewarding and thrilling for me. ■

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