



Professional Enrichment Course

University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
Office of Medical Education

PEC Registrar – Denise Downs d downs@pitt.edu 412-648-8749

Course Name: The Language of Medicine: The Semantics, Pragmatics, and Poetics of Doctoring

Enrollment Period:	Spring 2023
Course Dates:	Feb 6, 16, 20, 27 (3PM)
Student Max:	15
Class Year:	MS1, MS2
Course Director:	Barbara Duarte Esgalhado, PhD and Gaetan Sgro, MD
Course Administrator:	Gaetan Sgro, MD
Location:	Scaife
Registration:	Via Amp Up - Denise Downs will email with instructions
Course Description:	See syllabus (below)
Objectives:	See syllabus (below)
Pre-Requisites:	None
Requirements:	Attend all sessions (or complete make-up assignments for excused absences) and complete all assigned reading prior to each class.
Texts:	Provided

FOR COURSE DETAILS/

QUESTIONS, CONTACT: **Gaetan Sgro, MD**

610-836-2895 (cell)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION: In this course students will examine how language shapes perception, develop greater linguistic awareness, and learn skills to enhance clinical reasoning, enable empathic communication, and promote healing. Drs. Duarte Esgalhado and Sgro, both clinicians and writers, will lead the class through a series of discussions and exercises that explore the differences between literal and implied meanings, the limits of language in communication, the impact of metaphor and analogy on perceptions of illness, the effects of stigmatizing language on clinical reasoning and health outcomes, and the role of language and revision in reframing both perception and experience. All readings—including excerpts from poetry and literature, as well as scientific papers—will be provided.

Course Objectives:

1. Distinguish between semantics & pragmatics and between metaphorical & literal language
2. Describe the limits of written and spoken language in communication
3. Identify specific ways in which metaphors influence the perception of illness
4. Critically examine the impact of word choice and storytelling on patient perceptions, stigma, clinical reasoning, and health outcomes
5. Develop skills to revise/reframe clinical and personal narratives to enhance clinical skills, enable empathic communication, and promote healing

Session 1 – What Language Works: Introductory concepts in linguistics and discussion of metaphor

Required Reading: “Medical Linguistics” by Louise Aronson; “The Problem of Describing Trees” by Robert Haas; “Sing to It” by Amy Hempel; “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver

1. Semantics, pragmatics and the hidden curriculum of medical language
 - a. Definitions and discussion of Oliver
2. Introduction to Metaphor – What are metaphors? Where do they come from? How do they work?
 - a. Il Postino clip
3. The limits of language
 - a. Discussion of Haas and Hempel

Session 2 – Language in Clinical Medicine: Function and impacts on clinicians and patients

Required Reading: - “The Evidence Based Metaphor” by Brit Trogen; Excerpt: “Metaphor” from Two Kinds of Decay by Sarah Manguso; Excerpt from Illness as Metaphor by Susan Sontag

1. Positive and Negative Metaphors in Medicine
 - a. Discussion of Trogen
2. The Impact of Metaphors on Illness Narratives
 - a. Discussion of Manguso and Sontag
3. Exercise – create your own metaphors

Session 3 – The Dark Side: Stigmatizing Language and Bias

Required Reading: - “Do Words Matter? Stigmatizing language and the Transmission of Bias in the Medical Record;” “Negative Patient Descriptors: Documenting Racial Bias In the Electronic Health Record”

1. Medical jargon and Stigmatizing Language: The Dark Side of Language
 - a. Discussion of Goddu and Sun papers
2. Exercise - Review chart excerpt and identify examples of stigmatizing language, problematic problem representations, and “poor historian” practices

Session 4 – A Language of Healing: Revising, reframing, and retraining medical speech

Required Reading: - “What We Owe and Are Owed” by Kiese Laymon”

1. The role of revision in clinical narratives
 - a. Re-write excerpt from week 2
2. Revision and personal narratives
 - a. Discussion of Laymon
3. Exercise - Revise and reframe an illness narrative from your own life
4. Conclusion – The parable of the stonecutters