

Educate, Innovate, and Advocate Through Writing: Three Must-dos for Every Trainee

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The love of a story is something that we all share as child psychiatrists. I loved reading stories as a child. While growing up in India, stories let me explore the world and consider a variety of viewpoints. In medicine what I enjoyed the most was to listen to someone's story and see the whole person in the context of their experiences *and* diagnoses. Storytelling skills are at the core of writing clinical notes and critically evaluating papers and creating a biopsychosocial formulation. Writing good biopsychosocial formulations serves the purpose of documentation, analysis of clinical and research observations, and fosters engagement and reflection in clinicians during medical education and beyond.

The Role of Writing in Medicine

Writing in medicine spans the gamut of communication with patients, peers, teachers, paraprofessionals, managed care, ancillary organizations, policymakers and the community at large. As a pedagogical approach, narrative writing in medical education comprises acts of close reading, diagnostic listening that enlist the physician's curiosity, bearing witness, generating and weeding through differential diagnoses, analyzing clinical and laboratory findings with accuracy, reflective writing, and authentic discourse with patients. Narrative writing has been shown to increase empathy, create meaningful patient-physician relationships and deepen a sense of affiliation with colleagues, teachers, and self.¹ Scholarly writing in academic medicine encompasses writing research-related proposals, abstracts for conferences, manuscripts for publication in journals, disease or drug-related educational materials, content for healthcare websites and regulatory, policy and advocacy-related papers. Scholarly writing is traditionally encouraged to disseminate knowledge and to propel professional advancement in academics. But whether

one chooses a career in academics or private practice, writing keeps clinical skills sharp by ensuring that physicians read and stay abreast of current literature.^{2,3} Further, advocacy through writing is an essential tool for child psychiatrists to speak up for vulnerable and marginalized children, and those afflicted with mental illness. Writing for media,⁴ especially social media,⁵ can be effective in educating families about mental health and advocating for societal engagement. Lastly, writing can be a creative and cathartic outlet; nurturing that inner muse is particularly important for child psychiatrists to practice playfulness, find fulfillment, and seek succor.² Developing writing skills as an integral part of every trainee's academic journey and inculcating the mantra "educate, innovate, and advocate through writing" would enable trainees to maximize their contributions to the field.

Educate Through Writing

Writing presents a unique platform for trainees interested in teaching. Trainees can educate through scholarly writing by highlighting an unusual clinical presentation or side effect. Another opportunity for trainees to teach through writing includes utilizing the fundamentals of critical review in the form of a letter to the editor in response to a journal article. Drawing from the traditional wisdom of "write what you know" trainees can play to their strengths and harness their existing skill set to capitalize on low hanging fruit to launch into their teaching (writing) career. For trainees who are passionate about education, scholarly writing can extend their impact beyond their immediate circle to a far wider audience.

Innovate Through Writing

Writing can help trainees (and even experts) ponder complex issues, engage others in defining a problem

and design novel solutions. An example of innovation during training is the development of a clinical scholarship project. When trainees plan for publication of their clinical scholarship project after presentation within the training program, they can effectively disseminate the value of their innovation. Letters to the editor may also be an avenue for trainees to spearhead micro-innovations. Reporting a new observation or raising questions about the methodology and findings of a study through letters to the editor, allows for the next iteration of a study to build on critical suggestions and address identified limitations.

Advocate Through Writing

By putting thoughts and experiences into writing, trainees can raise awareness about pertinent issues in our field and pave the way for moving the needle. The AACAP Legislative conference is an example of an excellent venue for trainees to practice advocacy by writing to elected officials on social media. *JAACAP's* Book Forum column offers another platform for trainees to critique books while voicing opinions and championing causes dear to them. It is a fun way of polishing writing skills while practicing advocacy. *AACAP News*, *JAACAP Connect*, and *American Journal of Psychiatry Residents Journal* have trainee-friendly opportunities for advocacy that builds on the breadth of diagnoses, systems and policy issues introduced during fellowship. They also offer helpful resources for the aspiring author and advocate, such as the art of writing an engaging abstract,⁶ how to find and keep a good mentor,⁷ and the “Knowledge Skills Attitudes” model to overcoming “energy” barriers to writing.⁸

Finally, finding and emulating a good mentor is key to learning the crafts of teaching, research and advocacy through writing as a trainee. To draw on the persuasiveness of Andrés Martin, MD, doyen of mentors, “You may not know it, and someone early in his or her career may not believe it, but the fact is that someone wants to read your work, and there is a home for it. Only one thing is for certain: if you don’t get started and give it a real try, then your work will never be published. Writing is hard work, but it is also a skill you can learn and one that gets

better with practice and time... You have a story to tell, and someone out there wants to hear it. So get started and down to business. Roll up your sleeves. Just do it!”⁹

To sum up, trainees should consider education, innovation and advocacy through writing as essential components of their career path during and after medical education. Every trainee has something to offer and every voice matters. Viewing education, innovation, and advocacy as developmental stages in training may help steer trainees’ growth as educators, innovators and advocates through writing. When trainees increase their familiarity and facility with writing, they invest in their patients, their work and the development of our young field.

Take Home Summary

Developing writing skills should be an integral part of every trainee’s academic journey. Viewing education, innovation, and advocacy as developmental stages in training may help steer trainees’ growth as educators, innovators, and advocates through writing.

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