

# Narrative Medicine in Ophthalmology

By Martina Rama, BS | Mentor: Kalla Gervasio, MD

*Dr. Kalla Gervasio, Co-Chief resident at Wills Eye and founder of the Journal of Narrative Visions (JNV), a narrative medicine journal in the field of ophthalmology, speaks about narrative medicine and its importance in patient care.*

While technological and medical advancements have made it possible to diagnose and treat previously deadly conditions, modern day medicine comes with a new set of challenges around the doctor-patient relationship. Scientifically competent medicine cannot always help patients cope emotionally with their health issues. For physicians, understanding patients' experience with illness in order to comfort and accompany them through their challenges is just as important as meeting their physical health needs. Dr. Rita Charon, the founder of narrative medicine, highlights how physicians today sometimes lack the ability to connect with, empathize with, and support their patients through difficult diagnoses.<sup>1</sup> When physicians struggle to meaningfully engage with a patient's narrative, the

patient may feel uncomfortable and unheard. Narrative medicine aims to lessen the patient-provider gap, focusing on understanding patients' lives and suffering in order to promote healing. It involves developing narrative competence, which is the ability to listen to, absorb, and reflect on patients' stories.

How can narrative medicine be fostered and developed? Medical schools have started to incorporate literature into their curricula and encourage narrative writing to strengthen self-reflection.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, to engage with and share their experiences, physicians have begun to compile collections of creative pieces about medical practice. In the past decade, many narrative medicine journals have been established in fields ranging from internal medicine to pediatrics.

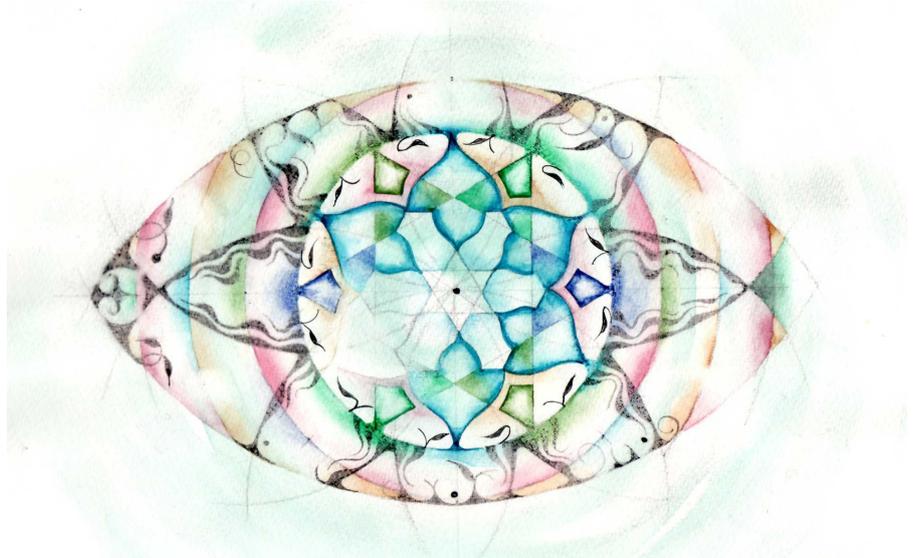
Dr. Gervasio founded the Journal of Narrative Visions (JNV), the first narrative medicine journal in the field of ophthalmology, in the summer of 2014. The journal collects submissions that range from poetry to artwork and narrative essays. When creating the journal, Dr. Gervasio was inspired by the literature background she developed as a Classics major in college and what she saw in clinical practice: "When I got to medical school and started shadowing ophthalmologists, I realized that a lot of the patients had life changing



**Dr. Kalla Gervasio**  
Credit: Wills Eye Hospital

**Oculus –**  
Karl Lorenzen

Originally published in  
*Journal of Narrative Visions*,  
Winter/Spring 2018.



experiences, from being able to see after cataract surgery, to losing vision for some retinoblastoma patients. There was a lot of emotion, both positive and negative, in these patients and experiences, and there was a lot to be explored in ophthalmology from a narrative medicine perspective.”

Dr. Gervasio describes the JNV as “an outlet for people to tell the story of patients and also the personal experiences of medical students, residents, fellows, and attendings. In medicine, expressing feelings is not always encouraged and the exploration of narrative medicine is a good way to do that in a safe space. Reading stories of other providers having similar experiences can be a way to connect and share in medicine.” Dr. Gervasio explains an example of finding connection through narrative medicine: “I really liked a lot of the global health pieces which came out when I was still in medical school and inspired me to go on a global health trip to Mongolia during my third year. It was striking to notice how some of my personal experiences during the trip were similar to what the contributors had written about.”

The JNV aims not only to connect

providers to other providers, but also to their patients. “By just reading the journal, medical students and physicians can understand patients on a deeper level and in a more humanistic way, especially nowadays that a lot of time is spent typing on the computer during the encounters, and it’s easy to lose the doctor-patient connection. Reading and reflecting on patients’ stories can help to have a more humanistic view,” Dr. Gervasio explained.

Narrative medicine exploration can even have profound effects on a professional level. Gurwin et al. published a study in Ophthalmology in 2017 about how artwork observation can improve medical student observation skills. The study assigned students to an art training group and a control group. In the art training group, students practiced observing and describing artwork at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Students from both groups were subsequently asked to describe retinal fundus photos.<sup>3</sup>

The results showed that the group who participated in the artwork observation exercise had greater descriptive skills than the other group. “Since our journal

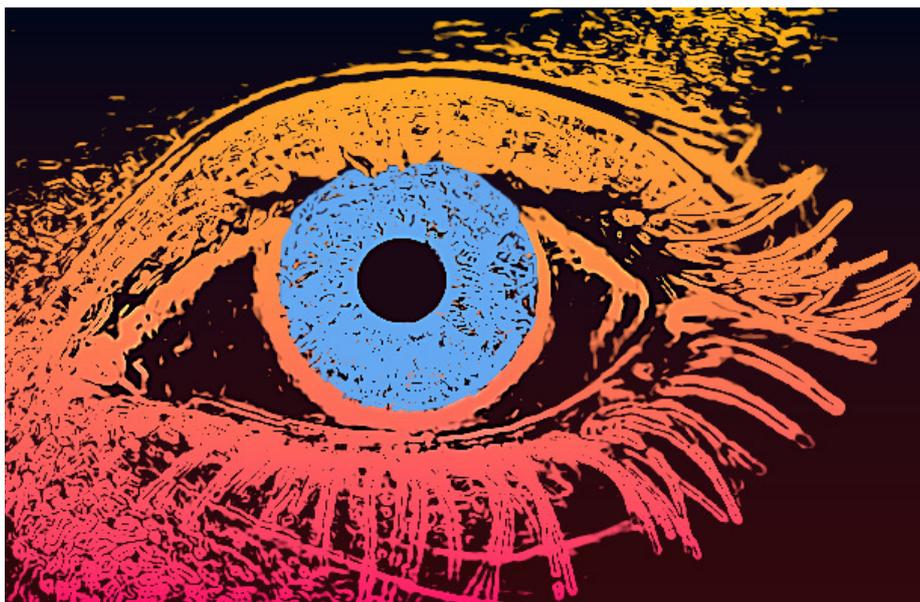
also publishes artwork pieces, this can be another way through which narrative medicine exploration could be beneficial," Dr. Gervasio adds.

With medical schools shifting their focus on educating the new generations of physicians to be compassionate, engaged, and authentic in taking care of their patients, narrative medicine has gained the attention of medical students. Dr. Gervasio says a recent poll on JNV "showed that it has been most popular with medical students, who are the biggest contributors. Medical school is hard, and during the preclinical work and rotations there are a lot of opportunities and interactions you can reflect upon as a medical student. That has really been some of the most interesting work we have received." For newcomers to narrative medicine, she encourages "all students to check out the journal and contribute their artwork, writing, and poems if they are interested." She also

recommends visiting "the Arnold P. Gold Foundation website, where there are a lot of opportunities for students interested in humanistic healthcare, with grants to apply for different projects. It was a grant from the Arnold P. Gold Foundation that allowed me to create the Journal of Narrative Visions."

#### References

1. Charon R. Narrative Medicine: A Model for Empathy, Reflection, Profession, and Trust. *JAMA*. 2001;286(15):1897–1902. doi:10.1001/jama.286.15.1897
2. Zaharias G. What is Narrative Based Medicine? *Can Fam Physician*. 2018;64(3):176-180.
3. Gurwin J., Revere K. E., Niepold S., Bassett B., Mitchell R., Davidson S., DeLisser H., Binenbaum G. A Randomized Controlled Study of Art of Observation Training to Improve Medical Student Ophthalmology Skills. *Ophthalmology*. 2018;125(1):8-14. doi: 10.1016/j.ophtha.2017.06.031



#### The Human 'I' – Antonio Yaghy, MD

Originally published in  
*Journal of Narrative Visions*,  
Spring/Summer 2019.