



## Linda Brodsky Memorial Journal

### **A Vital Nexus in Modern Healthcare: Informed Cultural Competence and Self-Reflection**

*Roshini Chandrasekhar*

To deliver equitable care, recognizing the significance of varied perspectives is crucial. Being open to understanding their origins in contextual disparities brings about a process of self-reflection. This in turn allows for the identification of personal biases and assumptions. Therefore, there is an interconnectedness that underscores the symbiotic relationship between cultural competency and self-awareness.

I grew up in the state of Tamil Nadu, but my medical school is in Karnataka - a different state in southern India. Since languages differ from state to state within India, the language the patients in the hospital speak is different from the one I chose to study in school. Both are also different from the language in which I speak to my own grandparents.

As hard as this may seem, it is a common challenge for medical students across the country, in so much as we don't stop to consider how much this may be

teaching us about cultural competency. I know that this entire process has helped me become more respectful of patients' diverse backgrounds and unique needs. It is what put me on the path to becoming conversationally fluent in three different regional languages, the native speakers of which have different cultures in addition to their different communication styles.

I believe that these formative experiences are akin to a positive feedback loop. They propel you to seek out further opportunities to expand your understanding of cross-cultural interactions as well as look inward. Learning to approach patient care from this mindset fosters a trust between the healthcare provider and the patient that ultimately leads to better patient outcomes.

A more comprehensive understanding of patients' needs comes by acknowledging the various components of social identity. Outreach programs that I participated in over the course of medical school included cancer screening programs for underserved rural populations. These helped me learn how socioeconomic factors impact health literacy and access to healthcare.

Cultural competence and self-awareness do not come about by remaining static. We need to make the commitment to challenge ourselves constantly and be dynamic in outlook to deliver inclusive healthcare. Recognizing the lifelong continuity of this journey is key to undertaking it successfully.

### **Beyond Realms: The Quest to Understand Neuroanatomy is Underway Even in Science Fiction**

*“During the very first anatomy lecture I attended a century ago, the lecturer showed us a severed arm, the casing removed to reveal the dense column of rods and pistons within.”*

The above line is from “Exhalation”, a collection of short stories by Ted Chiang that cemented not only my love for the science fiction genre, but also Neurology as a discipline. During medical school, I found myself reading more science fiction than ever before. As a reader that grew up inspired by the world building involved in the fantasy genre, science fiction was an easy pivot.

The stories in ‘Exhalation’ fundamentally deal with human nature and I believe healthcare professionals can draw meaningful takeaways from any of them. But the one that stayed with me, that I know

I will always return to, was the title short story ‘Exhalation’.

Over the course of the story, we meet a futuristic race assembled using intricate machinery and follow the protagonist’s efforts to uncover the mechanism behind his own cognition. What I thought I enjoyed most about science fiction was the otherworldly neural interfaces that push the creative boundaries of what those pathways can look like. But Chiang is also able to illustrate how in a race so unlike our own, in a land so unlike our own, beings are still driven by the same scientific curiosity. They are also awestruck at their own brains and capacity for mentation.

The narrator is an immortal mechanistic being who embarks on a journey of auto dissection- describing his own brain as the “most beautifully complex engine” he had ever beheld, “so far beyond any device man had constructed that it was incontrovertibly of divine origin.” Delving into Chiang’s artistic reimagining of the nervous system involving air pressure, gold leaves and tubing fuelled my burgeoning passion for Neurology. The vast neural networks employed in even the simplest daily activities aren’t often considered by us, but reading this story impresses how deserving of recognition they truly are.

The protagonist’s quest to unravel the

way cognitive functions are carried out also raises further questions about consciousness and its nature. The philosophical reflections on consciousness in the story are relevant from a neurological perspective and prompt ethical questions about consciousness that results from advanced technology.

‘Exhalation’ also deals with themes of loss, living on and the richness of life. To me, that champions the decision of healthcare workers to spend a portion of their lives in the service of others. As Chiang puts it, “even if a universe’s life span is calculable, the variety of life that is generated within it is not.”