

Bureau of International Osteopathic Medicine: Narrative Medicine Essay Contest

The Bureau of International Osteopathic Medicine is proud to announce its inaugural narrative medicine essay competition.

Increasingly, creative nonfiction is recognized as an important part of medical education and practice. In the past few years, there has been an uptick in the number of doctors who communicate with the public via journalistic articles and/or first-person creative nonfiction about health. Among the many examples are Siddhartha Mukherjee (*King of All Maladies, The Gene*), Atul Gawande (*Complications, Better*), and Sheri Fink (*War Hospital, Five Days at Memorial*); *Bellevue Literary Review* editor Danielle Ofri; and Perri Klass, Pauline Chen, and Mikkael Sekeres, all of whom have written reflections on medical practice for *The New York Times*. This nonfiction is both engaging and informative. It exists in part to increase [health literacy](#) among the public.

A growing number of “narrative medicine” programs at US universities acknowledge that creative writing has purpose even for doctors who don’t publish. Story-telling skills can be a crucial part of gathering diagnostic information from patients and communicating clinical information back to them. In addition, written reflection offers a method for considering the ethical implications and psychological weight of healthcare practice, adding to quality of care.

Because it increases empathy, creative nonfiction highlights a quality osteopathic medicine often emphasizes in itself. In addition, work with populations in low- and middle-income countries often elicits reflections on differences in culture, society, and economy and how these can impact health. All of this makes creative nonfiction particularly pertinent to osteopathic medicine and global health. Perhaps it’s no wonder that this form of expression is one we can glimpse in the written reflections of global health outreach participants.

We are proud to invite all current osteopathic medical students and residents to participate in the first annual BIOM Narrative Medicine Essay Competition.

Eligibility

The competition invites participants to submit short nonfiction narratives about global health outreach experiences they have had between September 1, 2016, and August 31, 2017. Any global health outreach work undertaken through or in collaboration with any college of osteopathic medicine or residency program in the United States is eligible, including activities done for credit, professional advancement, or personal enrichment.

This category includes

- First-person essays related to global health work, including opinions and personal impact.
- Nonfiction narratives that describe specific circumstances, conditions, or events in the lives of specific patients, healthcare practitioners, or communities where global health work is done.
- Essays that incorporate reflections on public health or clinical care in a region with narrative insights into the history, ecology, economy, or society of that region.
- Vignettes that present multiple occurrences to illustrate a theme.
- Travelogues (chronological presentations of activities undertaken while traveling).
- Lyric essays and other creative nonfiction essays, as long as content is squarely focused on health in an international context.

This category does not include

- Promotion of global health outreach trips, groups, businesses, or organizations.
- Fiction or essays that include fictional content.
- Poetry.

Format, Content, & Style

Because creative nonfiction is by nature more free-form, subjective and personal than academic writing, there is relatively little advice on structure, style, formatting, and content. However, we offer these guidelines.

Privacy

- As with research abstracts, it is inappropriate to disclose the identities of any research subject or patient. Please omit all names for persons receiving care or participating in global health as a recipient, and limit details that might allow the person to be identified.
- Bear in mind that colleagues, friends, and acquaintances might not want to be included as identifiable figures in your work. It is acceptable to use pseudonyms or omit names and identifiers for these individuals. Otherwise, seek permission from the identified persons before submitting the essay.
- Mark all pseudonyms with an asterisk (*) at first use.

Structure

- Any structure is acceptable. (For thoughts on how to structure a personal essay, look [here](#) and [here](#).)
- Any departure from chronological story-telling should be done purposefully.
- Limit experimental methods to what is necessary to tell the story. Plain-spokenness is no sin.
- Consider writing advice, perhaps from [Kurt Vonnegut](#) (with the caveat that he was mostly referring to fiction), [Elmore Leonard](#) (especially on avoiding “perpetrating hooptedoodle”), [Neil Gaiman](#) (especially the words “finish it”), and [Anne Lamott](#) (PDF; Warning: this link contains swear words).

Formatting

- The words limit is 1500 words.
- Use 12-point Times New Roman font, single-spaced, with normal margins.
- There is no need to include citations or references. Quotations are fine in sparing use.

Authorship

There are no strict standards for who may be considered an author of creative nonfiction. Generally speaking, these works have only one author, as they tend to involve the subjective perspective of a single writer whether or not that writer is at the center of the piece.

Generally, speaking, standards can be similar to those in use for research. Authorship requires:

1. Substantial contributions to the conception and design of the essay from the time of its conception;
2. Drafting the work *and* revising it critically for important intellectual content, including direct participation in every iteration;
3. Final approval of the version to be published; *and*
4. Agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the work, identical to the obligations of those submitting work to other categories of the competition.

Unlike research, it is not acceptable to give authorship to a supervisor, editor, or any other colleague who comments on, gathers information towards, or supervises the development of a creative nonfiction work. Please consult with the individuals involved for further clarifications as needed. (Note: Winners may thank individuals from the stage at OMED.)

How to Submit

To submit an essay, follow the link on the BIOM webpage to the submission portal.

Deadline

The deadline for this competition is September 5, 2017, at 11:59 PM Central Standard Time. Winners will be announced on September 15, 2017, and the BIOM Seminar will be held between October 6 and 8, 2017, in Philadelphia, PA, in coordination with the 2017 OMED Conference.