

Teaching Skin Diseases to Medical Students through Film

Richard F. Wagner, Jr.

Edgar B. Smith Professor of Dermatology. The University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Texas 77573 (USA).

Correspondence: Richard F. Wagner. The University of Texas Medical Branch Galveston, Texas 77573 (USA).

e-mail: rfwagner@utmb.edu

Received 23 November 2011; accepted 29 January 2012.

Resumen

Una amplia gama de enfermedades de la piel se han representado en el cine. Las películas siguen siendo una forma popular de entretenimiento, y este medio artístico tiene un gran potencial impacto cultural, debido a su disponibilidad a través de los medios de radiodifusión, internet, alquiler y compra. La enseñanza de la Dermatología de los estudiantes de Medicina a través de películas disponibles en el mercado permite a los participantes aprender más sobre las enfermedades de la piel comunes y no comunes, y crea una oportunidad para examinar de manera crítica el papel que las enfermedades de la piel juegan en estas producciones. Se describe la clase didáctica que ofrece la Universidad de Texas Medical Branch en la cuarta semana. Compartir esta información con otros educadores médicos puede hacer que la formación en dermatología sea más accesible a los estudiantes de medicina.

Palabras clave: Cine. Piel. Dermatología. Enseñanza. Educación.

Summary

A wide range of skin diseases have been depicted in cinema. Movies remain a popular form of entertainment, and this artistic medium has great potential for cultural impact due to its ready availability through broadcast media, internet, rental and purchase. Teaching medical students about dermatology through commercially available films allows participants to learn more about common and uncommon skin diseases, and creates an opportunity to critically examine the role skin diseases play in these productions. A four week, didactic class offered at The University of Texas Medical Branch is described. Sharing this information with other medical educators may make dermatology education more accessible to medical students.

Keywords: Cinema. Skin. Dermatology. Teaching. Education.

El autor declara que el artículo es original y que no ha sido publicado previamente.

Introduction

The success of using film to teach principles of psychiatry and behavioral sciences is well recognized^{1,2}. Dermatologists may use the same media to teach their subject^{3,4}. In comparing psychiatry and dermatology, there are similarities and differences. In film, the inner processes of the mind often become known to the audience through abnormal behavior on screen. Viewers see what the actor does, and make the connection to the character's mental state. Skin diseases are similar from the viewer's perspective, because the audience easily recognizes abnormal skin.

In contrast to psychiatry, clinical dermatology is not a required course of study at most medical schools in the United States. Historically, most clinical dermatology exposure occurs during elective course work by upper level medical students⁵. Dermatology electives are not available in many locations, and where available, student demand may be greater than the maximum enrollment. The predictable outcome of this educational approach is medical school graduates who are more knowledgeable about psychiatry than dermatology. However, skin diseases are much more common in the population than psychiatric ones, and most physicians will encounter skin diseases in their clinical practices. How should academic dermatologists address the current educational model's shortcomings, with the future goal of reaching the largest number of future physicians and teaching them about skin diseases?

Film with dermatology content offers an innovative way to reach larger numbers of medical students and offer them a broad and memorable introduction into the natural history, morphology, pathophysiology, diagnosis and management of representative skin diseases. An added benefit to this approach is that when skin diseases are part of a film, it becomes contextual: students are also able to see the impact of these diseases on the characters portrayed, as well as the disease's impact on other characters and the plot. This exposure to the totality of skin diseases may lead to student reassessment about the impact of skin diseases on patients and their families, and the economic and social costs of skin disease on the greater society. Film too, through its reductionist and often inaccurate depictions of skin disease, permit students a greater insight into media messages as they relate to skin diseases in particular⁶, and health care issues in general. Promotion of critical thought and skepticism is often a beneficial outcome through this type of educational exposure.

Course Materials and Logistics

The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston has 13 four-week Periods during each academic year. UTMB medical students require elective and

selective credits for graduation. Selectives are restricted to fourth year medical students and must contain a substantive writing component that is independently reviewed by the Selective Course Committee. Third year medical students and those visiting from other institutions may enroll in electives. The didactic UTMB film class is offered both as an elective <http://ar.utmb.edu/04-05review/bdisplay.asp?rec=377> and a selective <http://ar.utmb.edu/BSHSselectives/bdisplay.asp?rec=191>. Both classes meet together and the curriculum and course requirements are identical. Due to student demand, class enrollment grew to a maximum of 40 students per Period in 2011.

The departmental dermatology lending library maintains complete sets of all of the required film DVDs that enrolled students may borrow. In addition, the library has supplemental films with skin disease content, books, and related television materials that students may also borrow during the course. All borrowed materials must be returned by the last Friday of the Period, for use by other students by the start of the next Period. The required textbook is *Fitzpatrick's Color Atlas and Synopsis of Clinical Dermatology: Sixth Edition*. This text provides students with accurate information and objective clinical photographs of skin diseases studied in class, that they use for comparison to the film depictions studied.

This class was first conceived as a traditional onsite class in Galveston that was taught by a dermatology faculty, but several events led to the evolution of this course into its present form. UTMB sends some upper level medical students to Austin, Texas for their required third year rotations. As a result, some students moved to Austin and it was no longer convenient for them to take fourth year rotations in Galveston. In 2008, the Galveston campus suffered damage from Hurricane Ike, displacing additional third and fourth year UTMB medical students to other parts of Texas. The option of student teleconferencing to film class was created to meet the elective and selective needs of these students. The Galveston dermatology conference room is equipped with the Polycom SoundStation VTX1000 conference phone. Teleconferencing students use the services of freeconference.com at no charge if they elect to teleconference, although they may be charged for cell phone or land line connections, depending on their service plan.

Student participation is required during all class meetings (twice weekly for 2 hours during the Period) and considered in the "professionalism" component of the student evaluation. There are no make-up classes, and missed classes require a writing assignment that covers all of the missed materials. There is a final, 5-10 page essay due on the last Friday of the Period. Most students submit a movie review about a nonrequired film that

addresses some aspect of skin disease. However, creativity is encouraged in this assignment, and some students write about the impact of skin disease on someone they know, or the role of skin disease on a historic or contemporary public figure. All selective and elective grades for upper level medical students at UTMB are either "Satisfactory" or "Fail." The UTMB department of dermatology sponsors a graduation award for the student who submits the best essay by April of the academic year as determined by the course director. Three of the four past awardees are currently in dermatology residencies or are matched into one at another institution. Awardees' names are added to a dedicated plaque in the dermatology conference room. Selective students taking this course are also eligible for nomination by the course director for UTMB's John P. McGovern Award in Oslerian

Medicine for excellent work in the class; the award decision is made by the UTMB Selective Committee.

Curriculum

During the first class, the course syllabus is reviewed and a lecture is given about the history of dermatology and film to provide students with a background for later class work and film analysis. A film study guide for students to use during film viewing and analysis is provided (Table 1). During this class two pre-assigned articles about how to analyze media and film through deconstruction techniques are discussed^{7,8}. A *South Park* television episode, *Ginger Kids* (2005)⁹ is also analyzed and a related newspaper story¹⁰ about school violence involving children with red hair is discussed.

Table 1. Film Study Guide.

Name of film:
Year film released:
Director:
Producer:
Have the director(s) or producer(s) of this film been involved in other films that depicted skin disease(s)? If so, what diseases? How were these disease depicted?
Adaptation or screenplay?
Genre:
Awards for film or actors?
Main characters:
Relationships between characters:
Briefly summarize the plot:
Skin disease(s) depicted in film:
Morphologic description of skin disease(s) depicted:
From your prior experience and reading, is the movie depiction of the skin disease accurate?
Differential diagnosis of skin disease(s) depicted:
What type of patient history, physical examination and diagnostic tests are needed to make the skin disease diagnosis?
Why was this specific disease(s) selected for inclusion into this movie?
How does the skin disease(s) impact the character with the disease? Is it distressful? Does the character try to treat it or disguise it in any way?
How does the skin disease(s) impact other characters?
Does the skin disease have any impact on the movie plot?
Taking the film in its entirety, what is the film maker's view about the disease(s) depicted and its impact? Are you able to identify any artistic bias? What impression about the skin disease(s) depicted is the viewing public likely to gain from viewing this film?

The second class meeting focuses on discussion of two articles from *the New England Journal of Medicine* by Drs. Berland¹¹ and Buckwalter¹² about a health care documentary video, along with articles about media impact¹³ (analysis of Marshall McLuhan's famous quote, "The medium is the message.") and perception¹⁴. These materials reinforce lecture content from the first class. Remaining classes are used to discuss the 16 required films (Table 2), with a focus on the skin disease depicted. Multiple film genres are represented in this collection, as well as common and uncommon skin diseases.

Discussion

Several hundred medical students have taken this course since its introduction in 2007. During the 2010-2011 academic year, 150 medical students took the class, including visiting students from other medical schools. Film is a highly accessible media that remains popular with students. This popularity makes it an excellent educational tool to teach medical students about dermatology and skin diseases. Although the role of film in medical education still has skeptics¹⁵, academic film analysis in medical schools may help convince medical educators, faculty, administrators and students about its great potential. One recent film student reported that he was able to make an accurate clinical diagnosis (delusions of parasitosis) on an emergency room rotation due to a film

he had seen in the class and its discussion¹⁶.

References

1. Datta V. Madness and the Movies: An undergraduate module for medical students. *Int Rev Psychiatry* 2009;21(3):261-6.
2. Akram A, O'Brien A, O'Neill A, Latham R. Crossing the Line—Learning psychiatry at the movies. *Int Rev Psychiatry* 2009;21(3):267-8.
3. Chan C, Wagner RF Jr. Dermatology at the Movies. *Clin Dermatol* 2009;27:419-421.
4. Chan C, Wagner RF Jr. "Dermataintment": Teaching medical students about skin diseases using depictions in modern films." 67th Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Dermatology, San Francisco, California, 2009 (P1803). *J Am Acad Dermatol* 2009; Volume 60, Issue 3, Supplement 1, page AB90.
5. Philips RC, Dhingra N, Uchida T, Wagner RF Jr. The "Away" Dermatology Elective for Visiting Medical Students: Educational opportunities and barriers. *Dermatol Online J* [internet] 2009;15(10):1. Available from: http://dermatology-s10.cdlib.org/1510/originals/away_curriculum/wagner.html
6. Vickers JL, Uchida T, Wagner RF Jr. Television Depictions about Dermatology and Skin Diseases in Seinfeld. *Dermatol Online J* [internet] 2010;16(12):1. Available from: http://dermatology-s10.cdlib.org/1612/1_commentary/1_10_00322/vickers.html
7. Introduction to Media Literacy. Available from: http://medialiteracyproject.org/sites/default/files/resources/Intro_to_Media_Literacy.pdf
8. How to Deconstruct a Movie. Available from: <http://www.collativelearning.com/HOW%20TO%20DECONSTRUCT%20A%20MOVIE.html>
9. *South Park: Ginger Kids*, Season 9, Episode 11, first aired November 9, 2005. Available from: <http://www.southparkstudios.com/episodes/103676/>
10. Doyle S. Three Pupils Arrested in 'Ginger' case. *Los Angeles Daily News*, November 30, 2009. Available from: http://www.dailynews.com/ci_13897167?source=most_email
11. Berland G. The View from the Other Side—Patients, doctors, and the power

Table 2. Required Films.

Film Title	Focus Character	Topic
<i>Death Becomes Her</i> (1992)	Madeline Ashton	Aging Skin
<i>Philadelphia</i> (1993)	Andrew Beckett	Kaposi's Sarcoma
<i>The English Patient</i> (1996)	Count Laszlo de Almásy	Burn
<i>There's Something About Mary</i> (1998)	Dom	Urticaria
<i>Big Daddy</i> (1999)	Julian	Eczema
<i>Acne</i> (2000)	Multiple Characters	Acne
<i>The Others</i> (2001)	Anne, Nicholas	Photosensitivity
<i>Goldmember</i> (2002)	Number 3	Nevus
<i>Sorority Boys</i> (2002)	Frederique	Hirsutism
<i>The Singing Detective</i> (2003)	Dan Dark	Psoriasis
<i>The Libertine</i> (2004)	John Wilmot	Syphilis
<i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> (2005)	King Baldwin IV	Leprosy
<i>The Da Vinci Code</i> (2006)	Silas	Albinism
<i>Bug</i> (2006)	Peter, Agnes	Delusions of Parasitosis
<i>Good Hair: Sit Back and Relax</i> (2009)	Multiple Characters	Hair
<i>Black Swan</i> (2010)	Nina Sayers	Dermatillomania

of a camera. NEJM 2007;357(25):2533-2536.

12. Buckwalter JG. The Good Patient. NEJM 2007;357(25):2534-2535.

13. Federman M. What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message? Available from: http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/article_mediumisthemes-sage.htm

14. Looking Beyond the Borders of our Specialty: The 2006 Clarence S. Livingood MD Lecture. Dermatol Online J [internet] 2007;13(4):20. Available from:

<http://dermatology-s10.cdlib.org/134/opinion/livingood/feldman.html>

15. Darbyshire D, Baker P. Cinema in Medical Education-Has it penetrated the mainstream? J Med Mov [internet] 2012;7(1):8-14. Available from: <http://revis-tamedicinacine.usal.es/index.php/en/vol7/num1/625>

16. Altinger C. Film Class Helps UTMB MS4 Diagnose Patient in the Emergency Room. UTMB Dermatology Interest Group, November 21, 2011. Available from: <http://www.digutmb.blogspot.com>