How to keep humans at the center of health care

Panel of ASU experts discuss balance between technology, patient care during Humanities Week event

By Scott Bordow, ASU News
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Story highlights

A recent ASU Humanities Week event examined how in an age of technological innovations in medicine, humans can still be at the center of health care.

ASU professor says that the teaching of virtue in health care must begin in medical school, before would-be physicians are dealing with burnout or fatigue.

It was a picture that, in one way, said little: two hands, one with three fingers on the wrist of the other, taking their pulse.

A scene that's played out in medical facilities every day.

But Hannah Lennon asked the audience to see something else.

Lennon, part of the inaugural class of the John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering and president of the ASU Health Humanities Society, was speaking at Tuesday's "Health Care for Humans in the Digital Age" event.

The event, supported by ASU Health and part of Humanities Week on Arizona State University's Downtown Phoenix campus, examined how in an age of technological innovations in medicine, humans can still be at the center of health care.

Lennon told the audience that taking a patient's pulse was one of the first things she learned in her clinical skills and anatomy course at ASU. But as she looked at the slide, she didn't see a simple medical procedure.

She saw an opportunity.

“It seems like something minor, right?” Lennon said. “You’re just taking 30 seconds to a minute to take your patient’s pulse. But I think that this is a really great way to kind of pause for a moment and be present with the patient and build a sense of connection with them.”

The role of humanities in health care was the focus of a panel discussion that included Lennon, Annika Mann, co-director of the Health Humanities initiative at ASU, Ian Peebles, an assistant professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, and Swapna Reddy, an assistant dean in the College of Health Solutions.

Lennon said she decided to go to medical school not because science is her strong suit but because physicians work with patients who are “deeply human.”

“They have their own unique stories and backgrounds and goals and interests, careers, struggles, all of it,” Lennon said. “I think too often we see patients as another number. An identification number, a room number, a symptom, and there’s just so much more than that.”

Cora Fox, an associate professor of English and associate dean in the Shufeldt School who served as moderator of the event, told the audience the timing is right to examine the balance that needs to be struck between technology and patient care.

“All these amazing things, like offering remote monitoring for rural communities that haven’t had that kind of health care, are fantastic ways to advance equity and access in health,” Fox said. “But they also are challenges to the way that we practice medicine and the way we think about the care relationship, which is at the center of medicine and health care.”

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Reddy pointed to another challenge: The polarized views on health care in the United States and how patient care can get lost in the shouting.

“Often, it’s difficult to humanize these topics,” Reddy said. “So, if we’re talking about SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) or Medicaid, or about the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program, it’s difficult to really think through the human beings that are impacted by those policies, by those changes in benefits … if we’re not thinking about their lived experiences.

“It’s a little more difficult when we take the time to think about who these policies are genuinely impacting and if we continue to be comfortable with our positions once we really take a deep dive.”

Peebles told a story about how his sister, Alicia, was dealing with a serious medical condition and had to put up with an arrogant and uncaring doctor. He quoted American philosopher Edmund Pellegrino, who wrote, “Ethical analysis cannot substitute for character and virtue … The quality is determined by the characters of the persons doing the analysis.”

Peebles said current research shows that the practice of virtue in health care has three benefits:

- An improvement in patient-physician relationships

A reduction in burnout among physicians

It offers a path to necessary structural reform

“A return to virtue is a way to center humans in health care and to promote a more comprehensive vision of health and well-being,” Peebles said.

Peebles added that the teaching of virtue in health care must begin in medical school, before would-be physicians are dealing with burnout or fatigue, or even rude behavior from patients.

“That might have changed the way they (doctors) actually handled my sister when she was in the hospital,” he said.

Near the end of the discussion, Fox asked each panelist the same question: If they could imagine a more human-centered infrastructure, what would it look like and how can we get there?

“I think for me, it would be the recognition, compensation and support for invisible care workers,” Mann said. “We tend to imagine care in the hospital room or the emergency room. That’s the privileged side of care.

“Care in the home, care in those other rehabilitation spaces; what is it like for those care workers, those who are caring for aging parents? So I think it would be the recognition of that enormous volume of labor and then, much more increased financial and social support.”

Reddy had an interesting response: She referenced an article she read that suggested people in the health care system watch the HBO Max show, “The Pitt,” which follows the frontline health care staff at a fictional Pittsburgh trauma center.

“It’s really an accessible form of media that tells these real-life stories, not just from the perspectives of the patients, but also the impact on health care professionals,” she said. “I think exposing people who are making policy decisions to these kinds of deep, real, honest narratives can be an incredibly useful tool in humanizing, taking a step back and thinking beyond what’s written on a paper of what your side is supposed to think.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Swapna Reddy, an assistant dean in the College of Health Solutions, speaks in a panel discussion titled “Health Care for Humans in the Digital Age,” sponsored by ASU Health, on Tuesday, Oct. 27, as part of Humanities Week on Arizona State University’s Downtown Phoenix campus. Reddy was joined by (from left) Ian Peebles, assistant professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Annika Mann, co-director of the Health Humanities initiative at ASU, and first-year medical student Hannah Lennon, president of the ASU Health Humanities Society. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



First-year medical student Hannah Lennon, president of the ASU Health Humanities Society, speaks at a panel discussion titled “Health Care for Humans in the Digital Age,” sponsored by ASU Health, on Tuesday, Oct. 27, on ASU's Downtown Phoenix campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Cora Fox, associate dean of health humanities at the John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering, moderated the “Health Care for Humans in the Digital Age” panel on Tuesday, Oct. 27, on ASU's downtown Phoenix campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News