

# The Importance of a Physician's *Wit*: A Critical Analysis of Science in Medicine

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Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Wit*, describes a patient's battle with death and in the process reveals the distinction between science and medicine. Her play is a reminder to every physician that the practice of medicine is a complex discipline combining the warmth of human empathy with the rigors of scientific data and empirical fact. It is not enough to hinge decisions and diagnoses on scientific data and empirical fact; medicine is about much more.

The play begins as Vivian Bearing, Ph.D., a professor of seventeenth-century literature specializing in the metaphysical poetry of John Donne's Holy Sonnets, is told by Harvey Kelekian, M.D., the Chief of Medical Oncology at the University Hospital, that she has stage-four metastatic ovarian cancer. Dr. Kelekian describes the extent of her disease in strictly medical terms and enrolls her in his full dose, eight cycle chemotherapeutic protocol, fraught with pernicious side effects. However, Dr. Bearing only fleetingly pays attention to his description, since she is preoccupied with her initial diagnosis: ovarian cancer. Dr. Kelekian being a physician scientist treats patients while simultaneously researching future cures. Clearly, his goal is to "make a significant contribution to our [medical scientific] knowledge." Being an academic, Dr. Bearing is appreciative of his through description and understands Dr. Kelekian's desire to forge new knowledge. However, it is interesting to note that Dr. Bearing ignores her desire for compassion when presented with her diagnosis, and Dr. Kelekian is unwilling or unable to recognize her need. It is the pursuit of knowledge, either as a scholar or a scientist, that masks the universal need for compassion.

I [Vivian Bearing] know all about life and death. I am, after all, a scholar of Donne's Holy Sonnets.... And I know for a fact that I am tough. A demanding professor. Uncompromising. Never one to turn from a challenge.

Dr. Bearing may believe that the pursuit of knowledge can conquer any challenge, even death.

After her interchange with Dr. Kelekian, Vivian Bearing thinks back to her studies under E.M. Ashford, her English literature mentor. In the flashback, Dr. Ashford demands that Vivian rewrite her analysis of John Donne's Holy Sonnet, "Death be not proud," insisting, "you [Vivian Bearing] must begin with a text, Miss

Bearing, not with a feeling" and "the effort must be total for the result to be meaningful." In these statements, one can see the seeds of Dr. Bearing's uncompromising character and strictly academic nature that allow her to identify with Dr. Kelekian at the time of her diagnosis. Dr. Ashford instructs Vivian about the finer points of metaphysical poetry using the punctuation from two different editions of "Death be not proud." She compares the line "And Death shall be not more; Death thou shalt die!" in the edition selected by Vivian against the line "And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die." in Gardner's edition. Dr. Ashford notes,

Nothing but a breath-a comma-seperates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on stage, with exclamation points. It's a comma, a pause.

Edson chooses to tell Vivian's story with no break in the action between scenes as well as no intermission just as Donne's Sonnet suggests. After hearing Dr. Ashford's comments, Vivian wants to return to the library and rewrite her paper, because now she understands the metaphysical conceit. However, Dr. Ashford points out that this was not an intellectual exercise about wit, rather a lesson about living. "It is not wit, Miss Bearing. It is truth. The paper is not the point." Dr. Ashford urges Vivian to enjoy herself and realize that life is knowledge. Vivian comprehends the lesson about the metaphysical question of life's importance and purpose, but chooses to return to the solace of academic knowledge in the library intentionally leaving behind part of her humanity.

With a better understanding about the underpinnings of Vivian Bearing's character, one follows Vivian through a series of medical appointments (chest x-ray, GI series, and CT scan) where she is rapidly wheeled from place to place and asked the same impersonal questions by different technicians who are annoyed at performing routine tasks - tasks that are not simply routine to the patient. As the cold, rushed, impersonal reality of hospital medicine becomes apparent, Vivian is introduced to Jason Posner, M.D., the clinical oncology fellow under Dr. Kelekian and former student of Dr. Bearing. Right away one notes that Dr. Posner cannot handle the personal nature of introducing himself so he relies on Susie Monahan, R.N., B.S.N., the primary nurse for the

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cancer inpatient unit at the University Hospital. After a brief discussion about how Dr. Posner took Vivian's seventeenth-century literature course to look well-rounded for his medical school applications, Susie exits the examination room and Dr. Posner nervously begins taking Vivian's Medical history. He begins the interview with the statement, "How are you feeling today?" Simultaneously, Dr. Posner satisfies his desire to empathize with his patient and minimizes Vivian's actual feelings, since Vivian is obligated to provide the accepted answer, "fine," instead of relaying her true feelings to her physician. In one breath, Dr. Posner feigns compassion, patronizes his patient, and undermines the essential physician-patient bond. A series of quick and impersonal questions follow this ironic statement culminating in Vivian's story about the diagnosis of her tumor to which Dr. Posner has no response empathetic or otherwise.

Dr. Posner continues to demonstrate his nervous lack of humanity when he performs Vivian's physical examination. Dr. Posner places Vivian on her back and prepares to perform a gynecologic examination. He nervously begins to tell her to relax, but is really trying to calm himself. As the examination commences, he remembers that he must be supervised during a gynecologic examination and is annoyed at having to observe meaningless protocols for the sake of his patient's comfort. He leaves Vivian in stirrups to find Susie. Vivian, completely humiliated and totally vulnerable, retreats to her only solace reciting Donne's Holy Sonnet, "Death be not proud." When Dr. Posner returns with Susie, Susie immediately acknowledges Vivian's uncomfortable position. Without pausing to recognize his lack of compassion Dr. Posner begins Vivian's gynecologic examination and strikes up idle conversation with Susie about his experiences taking Dr. Bearing's course to calm his nerves. When he palpates Vivian's ovarian tumor, he exclaims, "Jesus!" A tense silence follows demonstrating Dr. Posner's complete lack of compassion and utter amazement and fascination with pathology. Without skipping a beat, he breaks the silence by returning to his conversation about Dr. Bearing's course as if nothing happened. Dr. Posner quickly leaves and Susie is left to clean up both physically and emotionally. The contrast between Dr. Posner and Susie, with respect to their interactions with Vivian, is distinct and begins to solidify them as symbols of medical scientific knowledge and genuine human compassion, respectively.

After being introduced to Dr. Kelekian, Dr. Posner, and Susie, the reader is left with the feeling that medicine is ruled by the science of diagnosis and treatment instead of the compassionate necessities of the soul. "I [Vivian Bearing] am learning to suffer." It is ironic that patient must suffer emotional degradation and personal humiliation to obtain proper medical care. Susie is the only character to acknowledge this discrepancy by legitimating Vivian's emotional and physical situation. Susie cares for Vivian's nausea as she is vomiting from her chemotherapy; Susie tries to accommodate Vivian by offering her Jell-O;

Susie notices Vivian has no visitors; Susie offers to call someone to visit Vivian; Susie volunteers to visit Vivian periodically to see how she is doing; Susie touches Vivian's arm in an empathetic gesture of pure human kindness. Vivian accepts Susie's compassion even though dealing with life on such personal terms and receiving unconditional kindness make Dr. Bearing uncomfortable, forcing her to question her uncompromising academic personality.

Vivian is next seen as the subject of grand rounds. Dr. Posner begins with the standard, "how are you feeling today?" then proceeds to rattle off the pertinent medical information about the treatment and staging of Vivian's ovarian cancer. To Vivian it seems that "They [The Clinical Fellows] read me like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught." After Dr. Posner completes his reading of Vivian, both Dr. Bearing and Dr. Kelekian acknowledge his "excellent command of details." Both teachers are proud of Dr. Posner's ability to present the cold, raw, impersonal facts in a through and academic manner. Neither teacher, at this point, is concerned with Dr. Posner's bedside manner. Dr. Kelekian then questions the fellows about the complications of the medications Vivian is taking. When the fellows do not answer correctly, he asks, "Why do we [Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Bearing] waste our time" and Dr. Bearing replies, "I do not know." Again, Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Bearing connect as scholars and teachers of knowledge. Finally, as the medical team examining Vivian exits, Dr. Kelekian stops Dr. Posner and urges him to speak with Vivian in a personal manner by uttering the simple word, "clinical." As Dr. Posner feebly thanks Vivian for allowing the clinical team to literally learn from her at this most vulnerable time, one notices that Dr. Kelekian is not devoid of compassion since he recognizes that he must instruct Dr. Posner in this aspect of medicine as well. Empathy simply does not come naturally to either Dr. Kelekian or Dr. Posner and they must consciously remind themselves of their personal and professional obligation to the patients with a word that connotes humanity and generosity.

Grand rounds are not only instructive for a clinical fellow but also for a scholar of words. Since it has always been Vivian's "custom to treat words with respect," she looks up the medical terms and acquires knowledge in the process. After all, words are her life's work. In fact, while reading *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunny* to her father on her fifth birthday Vivian comes across the word soporific and asks her father it means. He replies, "makes you sleepy." When Vivian sees the bunnies sleeping after eating too much lettuce, she realizes the magical power of words. With this explanation, one can see why Vivian believes that her "only defense" against her condition and treatment "is the acquisition of vocabulary." Understanding words gives Dr. Bearing control over her life, both inside and outside the classroom. "I [Vivian Bearing] could draw so much from the poems. I could be so powerful." Vivian retreats to poetry as her sanctuary when being examined

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by Dr. Posner, when she is enduring isolation and chemotherapy, or when she is suffering from metastatic bone pain. "You [The Audience] cannot imagine how time...can be...so still. It hangs. It weighs. And yet there is so little of it. It goes so slowly, and yet it is so scarce." Vivian also uses poetry to kill time in the most literal sense, and to stop time hereby regaining control of her life and maintaining power over death. So when Susie rouses Vivian from a dream involving a lecture about the metaphysical poem, "If poisonous minerals," to get another test, Vivian exclaims, "I do not want to go now!" because she does not want to relinquish her grasp on words, time, and life.

While Vivian suffers from shaking and a fever as a result of her chemotherapy, Susie becomes concerned for her well being and wakes Dr. Posner. Dr. Posner seeing Vivian in her shaking, feverish, weakened state begins, as usual, with, "How are you feeling?" and immediately diagnoses Vivian with fever and neutropenia or as Dr. Posner insensitively calls it a "'shake and bake.'" After giving his treatment, Susie approaches Dr. Posner about lowering the dose of Vivian's fifth cycle, since Vivian's quality of life is clearly suffering. Without consulting his patient Dr. Posner replies, "Lower the dose? No way. She's tough. She can take it." Again one is reminded of the stark difference in the goal and purpose of health care represented by Dr. Posner and Susie (i.e., knowledge and compassion, respectively). With the fifth full dose cycle underway Dr. Kelekian reports, "definite progress. Everything okay." As Vivian feebly affirms, one notes that there may be progress on the academic level but there has been little for Vivian's health as she lies in the isolation room, since all living things are a hazard to her health. Vivian acknowledges, "My [Vivian Bearing's] treatment imperils my health. Herein lies the paradox." At this point, the acquisition of knowledge has usurped the purpose of curing Vivian's tumor. Dr. Bearing as a scholar cannot help but takes pride in the fact that her uncompromising nature is "distinguishing myself in illness" and will provide "celebrity status for themselves [Harvey Kelekian and Jason Posner] upon the appearance of the journal article they will no doubt write about me [Vivian Bearing]." Yet, she cannot deny that "what we [The Audience] have come to think of as me is, in fact, just the specimen jar, just the dust jacket, just the white piece of paper that bears the little black marks." Vivian's academic nature has come into direct conflict with her human needs; she begins to realize, at least subconsciously, that she can no longer hide her desire for compassion behind scholarly words.

As Vivian begins to comprehend her personal needs, she also attempts to understand Dr. Posner as a human being and discovers that he is not much different from her. Vivian asks Dr. Posner about his bedside manner and he replies, "There's a whole course on it in med school. It's required. Colossal waste of time for researchers." Here one sees that dealing with human needs directly is not

paramount to Dr. Posner; he prefers to deal with medical needs indirectly through research. Vivian then asks Dr. Posner about his selection of oncology as his focus in life and he replies, "Cancer's the only thing I ever wanted.... It is awesome." One cannot miss the parallels between his response for cancer and Dr. Bearing's enthusiasm for the poetry of John Donne; they are both driven by the academic challenge. In fact, Dr. Posner makes the same decision, to study science and ignore the fact that life itself is just as important, that Dr. Bearing made when Dr. Ashford confronted her on the same issue. "I've [Jason Posner] got a couple ideas, things I'm kicking around. Wait till I get a lab of my own, If I can survive this...fellowship." Interestingly, Vivian defines the medical term fellowship as "the part with the human beings," and then directly questions his humanity, "Do you ever miss people?" Every time Dr. Posner is asked this question he lies and says, "yes," because it is what he is supposed to say to not appear unsympathetic. With this final answer Dr. Bearing is convinced that she and Dr. Posner are the same.

So. The young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity. At the same time the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as a simpering victim, wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contact.

After it is revealed that Dr. Bearing denied a student an extension on a paper so the student could return home after the death of the student's grandmother. One can see that Dr. Bearing has committed the same sin as Dr. Posner, both have denied compassion to others for the sake of knowledge. Yet, it is a far greater sin to neglect humanity if one deals in life and death, as Dr. Posner does, than if one discusses the meaning life and death in poetry, as Dr. Bearing does. Dr. Posner has a moral obligation to his patients while Dr. Bearing does not have such an obligation to her students.

Vivian thinks, "being extremely smart would take care of it. But I [Vivian Bearing] see that I have been found out." She has come to the conclusion that if she "hides behind wit," she will never receive the personal contact that she so longs for. Words and uncompromising character will no longer hide Dr. Bearing's cold and uncaring heart; they are useless against the grim march of time.

When the speaker considers his own sins, and the inevitability of God's judgment, he can conceive of but one resolution: to disappear.... The speaker does not need to hide from God's judgment, only to accept God's forgiveness.

Vivian accepts humanity, and she reaches out to Susie for the compassion and forgiveness she so desperately needs, since her physicians have been unable or unwilling to offer her the emotional support that she needs so desperately. "I wanted her [Susie Monahan] to

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come and see me. So I had to create a little emergency." Susie legitimates Vivian's feelings of difficulty, fear, and self-doubt. With Susie to support her emotionally Vivian no longer needs to have uncompromisingly strong character, no longer needs to fear the failure of her treatment, no longer needs words to stall the inevitable march of time; she only needs Susie's compassion to comfort her aching soul. As Vivian cries, Susie offers her a Popsicle. Vivian splits the Popsicle and shares it with Susie as her first act of unsolicited human kindness. The splitting of the Popsicle represents Vivian's acknowledgment that humanity and knowledge go hand in hand in every aspect of life be it medicine or literature.

Vivian is now free to address the reality of her situation on human terms. "My cancer is not being cured, is it?" In fact, Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Posner "never expected it to be, did they?" Susie is also free to bring up the issue of Vivian's "'code status'...'Do Not Resuscitate'...'DNR.'" Susie "wanted to present both choices before Kelekian and Jason talk to you," because she understands that

they like to save lives.... as long as life continues. It doesn't matter if you're hooked up to a million machine. Kelekian is a great researcher and everything. And the fellows, like Jason, they're really smart. It's really an honor for them to work with him. But they always...want to know more things.

Dr. Bearing acknowledges this point of view, "I always want to know more things. I'm a scholar." However, in the face of death she is no longer a scholar she is human and interested in the quality of her remaining life, not scientific knowledge. She just wants it to stop. "'It': such a little word. In this case, I think 'it' signifies 'being alive.'" Vivian fears relinquishing control of her life and acknowledging that her wit cannot conquer death. "Now is not the time...for wit... Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness." She has realized that life is more than just knowing; it is about caring and letting others care for you. "You're still going to take care of me aren't you?" With this act of dependence is Vivian has finally come to grips with her need for humanity.

Having come to terms with her need for humanity, "it [death] came so quickly, after taking so long." Vivian now sees her health care in the hands of Susie. "Susie says that I need to begin aggressive pain management if I am going to stand it [living]." Compassion not knowledge has become the most essential part of Vivian's health care. Only Susie sees Vivian's metastatic bone pain. Dr. Kelekian asks, "Dr. Bearing, are you in pain?" Vivian becomes furious with Dr. Kelekian's inability to understand her physical and emotional needs. She defiantly asks the audience, "How are you feeling today?" to emphasize the irony of medical compassion and to begin her silent acceptance of both life and death. As Vivian is

administered morphine, one sees her conversion from an uncompromising professor of seventeenth-century literature to a kind-hearted teacher of words when she teaches and demonstrates the definition of soporific to Susie while laughing instead of snarling at Susie's lack of vocabulary. While Vivian is asleep, Susie talks to Vivian about the procedure (inserting a urinary catheter) that she and Dr. Posner perform. Dr. Posner displays his usual lack of compassion, "like she can hear you," while Susie continues to care, "It's just nice to." Dr. Posner cannot understand why he and Susie are different as health care providers, and he asks, "What do they teach you in nursing school?" Susie does not answer, she just rubs baby oil on Vivian's hands, and the answer is understood. The difference between Dr. Posner and Susie is obvious. While discussing his experience with Dr. Bearing as a professor, Dr. Posner realizes that the study of poetry and medical science are the same.

They [The Holy Sonnets] were mostly about Salvation Anxiety.... you know you're a sinner. And there's this promise of salvation, the whole religious thing. But you just can't deal with it... But you can't face life without either. So you write these screwed-up sonnets.... Like a game, to make a puzzle so complicated.... The puzzle takes over. You're not even trying to solve it anymore. Fascinating, really. Great training for lab research. Looking at things in increasing complexity.... When it comes right down to it, research is just trying to quantify the complications of the puzzle.

Finally, one can see how Dr. Bearing and Dr. Posner have become so educated yet lack compassion. They both studied the puzzle and forgot to contemplate the fundamental reason for studying that quandary in the first place. Both science and poetry are puzzles with many interesting and intriguing problems to be solved, but these puzzles are about the very nature of humanity. The goal is not to solve the puzzle of humanity with increasing knowledge but rather to appreciate why the puzzle is so complex to begin with and strive to make it just a little less confusing for others.

Dr. Ashford comes to visit Vivian. She sits at Vivian's bedside and offers to comfort Vivian by reciting Donne. However, Vivian wants nothing to do with Donne; she no longer wants to hide from death. Dr. Ashford reads *The Runaway Bunny* instead. "A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it [The Little Bunny] hides, God [The Mother Bunny] will find it." After Dr. Ashford leaves, Dr. Posner discovers that Vivian is unresponsive to his usual "How are you feeling today?" and calls for a code as he begins CPR. Susie enters and informs him that Vivian is 'DNR.... NO CODE!' Dr. Posner reflexively responds, "She's Research!" She is no longer truly human. The code team enters and begins the final desecration of Vivian's humanity; they ignore her wish to die

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without exclamation. With this egregious display, Dr. Posner finally sees the difference between science and medicine. He and Susie exclaim,

Stop! Patient [Vivian Bearing] is DNR! No, no! Stop doing this. STOP!.... She's NO CODE! Order was given-Look! Look at this! DO NOT RECESSU-TATE. KELEKIAN.... I [Jason Posner] MADE A MISTAKE!

With this realization, Vivian slips into death and Jason is left to contemplate his profession and life having acknowledged the sanctity of human kindness. Jason represents the hope that we as physicians can recognize our shortcomings and change.

There are no more words as Vivian succumbs to her disease. Fittingly, she has lived her life according to Donne.

The sonnet ["Death be not proud"] begins with the valiant struggle with death, calling on all the forces of intellect and drama to vanquish the enemy. But it is ultimately about overcoming the seemingly insuperable barriers separating life, death, and eternal life.

She has struggled to shield herself from death with words and exclamation points, but having accepted her humanity there is no more struggle since death is just another part of life, a pause. Vivian's realization that scholarly knowledge, while important, is not paramount forces us, as physicians and people, to look at our own scholarly lives. We begin to understand Edson's message that life is meant to be lived in the context of other lives, not books. Through sharing and learning about humanity, we begin to fulfill life. Death becomes inconsequential. Now we can see that Dr. Kelekian and

Dr. Posner are symbols of everything that is scientific and scholarly within medicine; they represent the typical physician or physician scientist in the mind of an average person who has had an average or poor health care experience. Susie is the symbol of everything that is compassionate and humane within medicine; she represents the health care professional that every patient hopes to interact with regardless of how much she knows or understands. By showing each extreme within medicine, Edson allows physicians, present and future, to contemplate where they stand within the practice of health care. One can see the parallels in Vivian's conversion and ours after reading this play. Medicine is not only about curing diseases with the most up to date technology and medications, rather medicine is about understanding the needs of people and then treating their ailments within that context. As physicians, we should heed Edson's warning and strive to acquire knowledge and cure disease but not at the expense of humanity.

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#### REFERENCE

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