

The Medical Benefits of Vitamin P

Glen Downie, BA (Hons), MFA, BSW

Artist in residence, Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University

I cannot claim to have discovered Vitamin P, and I am honestly not sure who did. I first heard of it in the writings of Canadian poet David McFadden, who said "poetry contains Vitamin P. You can die for lack of what is to be found in poetry". Regarding its effects, he seems to have been building on the observation of an earlier American poet, William Carlos Williams, who wrote, "it is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there" [1]. Obviously, both are convinced that poetry contains something valuable, something life- and health-sustaining. So, in their minds at least, the medical benefits of Vitamin P are significant.

Perhaps there are skeptics among you who think that such talk is not to be trusted, that all this is typically flowery, exaggerated "poetic" language, or worse still, flagrant self-promotion on the part of poetry's practitioners. But please bear in mind that Williams was not only a poet but a physician. We may presume that he knew a thing or two about dying, and dying miserably. I see no reason to believe that he was being anything less than candid when he says that men die miserably every day for lack of what is to be found in poems.

Notice he does not say "die suddenly." A temporary lack of Vitamin P is apparently unlikely to induce heart attack or suffocation, although I have attended lectures and parties where I felt certain this was happening to me, and had to step outside and take several very deep breaths. This may, I admit, reflect a lack of normal coping skills, but I do not think the reaction was entirely attributable to personal idiosyncracies. Walt Whitman describes a similar sudden onset of symptoms in a poem entitled "When I Heard the Lern'd Astronomer;" he, too, had to step outside and look up at the stars to recapture the sense of wonder that the expert windbag was in danger of talking to death [4]. I am sure you can relate,

despite the undoubted excellence of your instructors here at Dalhousie. But in any case, I think that it is safe to assume that what McFadden and Williams are talking about is not an acute reaction, but the organism's response to a *chronic* Vitamin P deficiency: a miserable life and eventually a miserable death.

Some of you will say that you know many people who live perfectly healthy, happy lives without the benefit of Vitamin P. I do not deny that this is possible, and I do not think that McFadden or Williams would either. But I think that the explanation for it lies in the fact that some of the beneficial effects of Vitamin P are also obtainable from other sources. I suspect, for instance, that as poetry contains Vitamin P, music contains Vitamin M, and that the physiological effects and health benefits of these two agents are similar in many respects. I would encourage those of you who have already begun research in this area to persist in documenting your findings. Because the time may come in provinces in provinces such as Ontario, where I live now, when governments refuse to fund education that includes study of poetry or music in the mistaken belief that they produce no measureable benefit to society.

The problem, of course, lies in the fact that, as Williams said, it is hard to get the news from poems. The Premier of Ontario is likely the type of fellow who wants the news, the facts, the statistics, rather like Whitman's learned astronomer, and when he goes to poems he finds it difficult to get this sort of information. He dismisses poetry as irrelevant and does not return. He is not alone. Many people have been raised to believe that the news, with its facts and figures, is the only form of truth that matters. There are even, dare I say it, doctors among us who think this way. We can only hope that in some unguarded moment a piece of music will make them weep, or a phrase of poetry will take them unexpectedly back to a childhood memory, or a moment when they were genuinely in love. Then, perhaps, they will begin to concede that a diet deficient in these little-

Address correspondence to:

Medical Humanities Program, Faculty of Medicine, Sir Charles Tupper Medical Building, Room 2L-22, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS B3H 4H7

recognized vitamins is a poorer one than we deserve.

At the risk of doing for Vitamin P the kind of suspect prostelytizing that Linus Pauling did for Vitamin C, perhaps I should provide some personal testimonial of my experiences with this agent. I personally do not believe that Vitamin P is addictive in the noxious sense, although I cannot imagine going without it in some form anymore than I can imagine living without water or sunlight. But I concede that there may be some side effects to large doses over a lifetime. The aforementioned intolerance for, or disinterest in, ho-hum and chit-chat seems to be one, in my case at least, though to be candid, this may be a pre-existing condition.

For the most part, my personal experience has been that the effects of Vitamin P are overwhelmingly positive. Certainly one of the benefits is a deeper understanding of myself and the life around me. Poetry, according to W.H. Auden, is "the clear expression of mixed feelings", and self-understanding was obviously one of his motives for writing. I think it was he who asked "how do I know what I feel until I see what I say?" [4] I agree with that observation, which incidentally points to something important for those of you thinking of writing about your medical experience. The practice of poetry is more a process of discovery than an opportunity to pontificate. If you already know exactly what you want to say before you start writing, chances are you should be writing an essay and not a poem.

The expression of one's mixed feelings about life, and life in medicine, is to my mind a way of coming clean and staying vulnerable to experience instead of developing the emotional armour that is a form of death. So, perhaps we can say that one of the benefits of Vitamin P is that, like some marvellous lineament, it keeps one emotionally supple or prevents hardening of the attitudes.

It may also be important to underline the word "clear" in Auden's clear expression of mixed feelings. Good poetry is not a simple outpouring of muddy washwater from someone's emotional laundry. Poetry is a crafted language, laboured over, revised, and designed with care to represent experience in a specific way from a specific vantage point. To focus intently on words and pauses, to create the maximum effect in a minimal space, especially when we are accustomed to using language casually without a moment's thought—this requires discipline and love. To make in one poem a hundred or a thousand tiny choices between the nuances of this word or that, whether to pause here or there, develops our capacity for discernment. So, perhaps we can also say that one of the benefits of Vitamin P is that it focuses the mind and sharpens the ear as well as sensitizes the spirit.

If it has not yet been apparent, I mean to imply in these remarks that the benefits of Vitamin P accrue to those who read poetry as well as to those who write it. While the writer, through those many small choices, does a large part of the work, a good poem does not spoon-feed the reader but calls on him or her to engage and contribute something too. Being a good reader of poetry also demands a focused mind, a discerning ear, a supple imagination, and an open and sensitive spirit. These same attributes, I might add, are good qualities

to have if you are a physician who hopes to truly hear what your patients are saying, both in their words and in their silences, when they come seeking your help.

And now perhaps I should take a lesson from Whitman's poem and stop talking so much about something that has to be experienced to be appreciated.

REFERENCES

- 1 Williams, William Carlos 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower', *The William Carols Williams Reader*, New Directions, 1965, p. 73-4.
- 2 Whitman, Walt 'When I Heard the Learned Astronomer', *Leaves of Grass*, Sherman and Co, Philadelphia, 1900 edition, pg. 341.
- 3 Auden, W.H. quoted in X.J. Kennedy *An Introduction to Poetry*, 3rd edition, Little Brown and Co, Boston and Toronto, 1974, p.303

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Glen Downie was the fall 1999 Artist-in-Residence in the Medical Humanities Program of Dalhousie University's Faculty of Medicine. He is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently a new and selected collection of medical poems entitled *Wishbone Dance* (Wolsak and Wynn 1999). His work has appeared in many literary reviews and anthologies, and a number of medical journals, including *The Lancet* and *The Journal of Emergency Medicine*.