The role of imaginative literature in clinicians’ professional lives
Towards a randomised controlled study

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A Science in Culture Exploratory award enabled this project team to hold two interdisciplinary workshops to consider methodological obstacles to measuring the impact of collective literary study on clinicians’ professional lives. Participants including literary scholars, academic specialists and health practitioners took part in the study which reached two major sets of findings on the subject.
The project held two workshops to consider methodological obstacles to measuring the impact of collective literary study on clinicians' professional lives. These were specifically interested in whether it would be possible to set up a controlled assessment to measure such impact. The participants included literary scholars, academic specialists in the health humanities from medicine and nursing, a trials methodologist, GPs, a hospital doctor, philosophers, as well as clinicians and physicians who teach literature as part of professional medical training.

The project reached two major sets of findings. The first was that an exploratory study not involving randomization could produce interesting results which would prove useful to a subsequent, more ambitious study. The second is that a randomised controlled trial to study the impact of literary study on clinicians is not warranted at the moment, given the underdeveloped state of understanding in this area.

The investigators used this information to devise a study to take place in five stages. Two series of baseline tests would be administered to the groups of clinicians. The first would aim to measure certain clinical virtues, including but not limited to sensitivity to the variety of patients’ life trajectories; curiosity; humility; patience; tolerance. The second would measure literary skills including but not limited to the abilities to tolerate and understand ambiguity; to perceive how imaginative worlds are constructed through voice, tone, presentation of psychology. The third step would be the intervention itself, i.e. the reading course, which would probably need to last a year or more and be facilitated by specialists in literary reading and small groups.

There would then be two 'exit' tests identical to the first two baseline tests. Differences would be considered. The primary data would be the self-reported experiences of the participants. If possible, the investigators would also re-interview participants 2 to 3 years after the start of the study to ascertain whether the course led to longer term shifts in “habits of mind”, and more specifically, in reading habits and self-perceptions of reading clinicians.

The exploratory award enabled the project team to identify the main difficulties standing in the way of the most methodologically-robust means of testing the effects of literature (an hypothesis driven randomized controlled trial), to chart a methodology that would help to characterise, in an exploratory way, the benefits of a challenging course of reading in imaginative literature for young clinicians. It thereby laid the basis for further future study of this question.

"The Exploratory Award allowed us to assemble a high calibre, multi-disciplinary, multi-professional team from four European countries, members of which could meet face-to-face and get to know each other."  
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