

**THE ANDY DIEHL “ON BEING A DOCTOR ESSAY AWARD”  
AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS TEXAS CHAPTER**

**SOME TIPS ON WRITING THE NARRATIVE OR POLICY ESSAY**

**by**

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Doctors spend our professional lives listening to stories. We do this primarily, of course, to help us diagnose the ailments of our patients. Secondly, the art of “narrative medicine” is to make us better listeners, more attentive caregivers.

But there is another purpose for us to hone our ability to listen, and that is to transform the stories we *hear* into stories we can *tell* to educate ourselves, our patients and our colleagues. Essential to this process is our ability to put what we have heard--together with our knowledge base and our hard-earned wisdom--into words. This art form—and it is an art—is called the personal essay. It can take many forms and may be called by other names (including the narrative essay, or the policy essay) but at its most basic, these are all personal essays.

One of the best sources to look for examples of the personal essay that touch on health policy and care is the journal *Health Affairs*. In July, 1999, the editors, in establishing the “Narrative Matters” (NM) section of this journal wrote the following:

*In the eighteen years that Project HOPE has published Health Affairs, America’s medical care system and the making of health policy have become big business. But the voices of patients, their families, and their caregivers have often gotten lost in the relentless shuffle... (We) have come to believe that we could enrich the journal by nurturing a form of health policy writing that affords greater opportunity for new voices to contribute to future debates. (Iglehart, John, HA, July, 1999.)*

Who better to write policy narratives than physicians, with our knowledge and perspective throughout the human life span, our emphasis on the individual patient and family, our often critical attitude towards the conventional wisdom when it comes to medical “advances” and new technology? Our enlightened views on the end of life experience. Our steadfast commitment to patient advocacy.

Here are some points—stipulated by Dr. Fitzhugh Mullan (a founding editor of NM) in his inaugural-- to keep in mind as you go about writing your health policy narrative:

*...the subjective characteristics of the personal essay are not prominent values in the science of today, nor are they part of the growing efforts in the field of health policy to make decisions based on quantitative measures...yet...the report of life events from an unabashedly subjective vantage point— remains a powerful tool for focusing the human mind.*

A skeptic might ask: DO policy narratives have any real effect on policy makers? Here is what John E. McDonough, executive director of Health Care for All in Boston, MA, former health committee chairman in the Massachusetts House of Representatives had to say in his own Narrative Matters piece:

*Stories can enable lawmakers to understand a legitimate need for policy change but can, just as readily, lead them to make bad policy decisions...One compelling anecdote (true or false) at a crucial moment in a floor debate can vaporize a mountain of data and careful policy analysis.”*

*Perhaps the real power of stories lies in their reflection of ideas and values...Much of the policy process involves debates about values masquerading as debates about facts and data.*

And this quote by Dan Fox, historian and health policy commentator, pretty much sums up the power of the personal narrative: “The plural of anecdote is policy.”

So how do we accomplish this in our writing? Here are some simple rules:

--An author must be able to answer one simple question: “How do you know that?”

--The story needs to be true and contextual to the policy issues at hand.

--No “red herrings.”

Here are just a few of the approximately 130 journals publishing “health policy” pieces:

--*Health Affairs*

--*Alzheimer’s and Dementia*

--*Medical Care Research and Review*

--*Implementation Science*

--*Health Education & Behavior*

--*Milbank Quarterly*

--*Health Policy and Planning*

--*Health Services Research*

--*Health Policy*

--*Academic Medicine*

What makes a personal or policy narrative compelling?

Here are some writing tips from one of the masters of the personal essay form, Philip Lopate and taken from his book, *The Art of the Personal Essay*.

*The essayist must be a good storyteller.*

*The hallmark of the personal essay is its intimacy. The writer seems to be speaking directly into your ear, confiding everything from gossip to wisdom.*

*The personal essay has an open form and a drive toward candor and self-disclosure. Unlike the formal essay, it depends less on airtight reasoning than on style and personality.*

*The personal essay has historically sought to punctuate the stiffness of formal discourse with language that is casual, everyday...*

*Some vulnerability is essential to the personal essay. Unproblematically self-assured, self-contained, self-satisfied types will not make good essayists...The enemy of the personal essayist is self-righteousness.*

*Personal essayists go against the grain of popular opinion.*

*The struggle for honesty is central to the ethos of the personal essay...So often, the 'plot' of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty...If the essayist stays at the same flat level of self-disclosure and understanding throughout, the piece may be pleasantly smooth, but it will not awaken that shiver of self-recognition...which all lovers of the personal essay await as a reward.*

*Personal essayists are adept at interrogating their ignorance. Just as often as they tell us what they know, they ask at the beginning of an exploration of a problem what it is they don't know—and why. They follow the clue of their ignorance through the maze.*

*An (important) formal technique...is the movement from individual to universal.*

How should a personal or policy narrative be judged?

- Is the story arc believable?
- Is the story engaging?
- Is the story honest?
- Is the story factually correct?
- Is the policy relevance apparent or not?

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