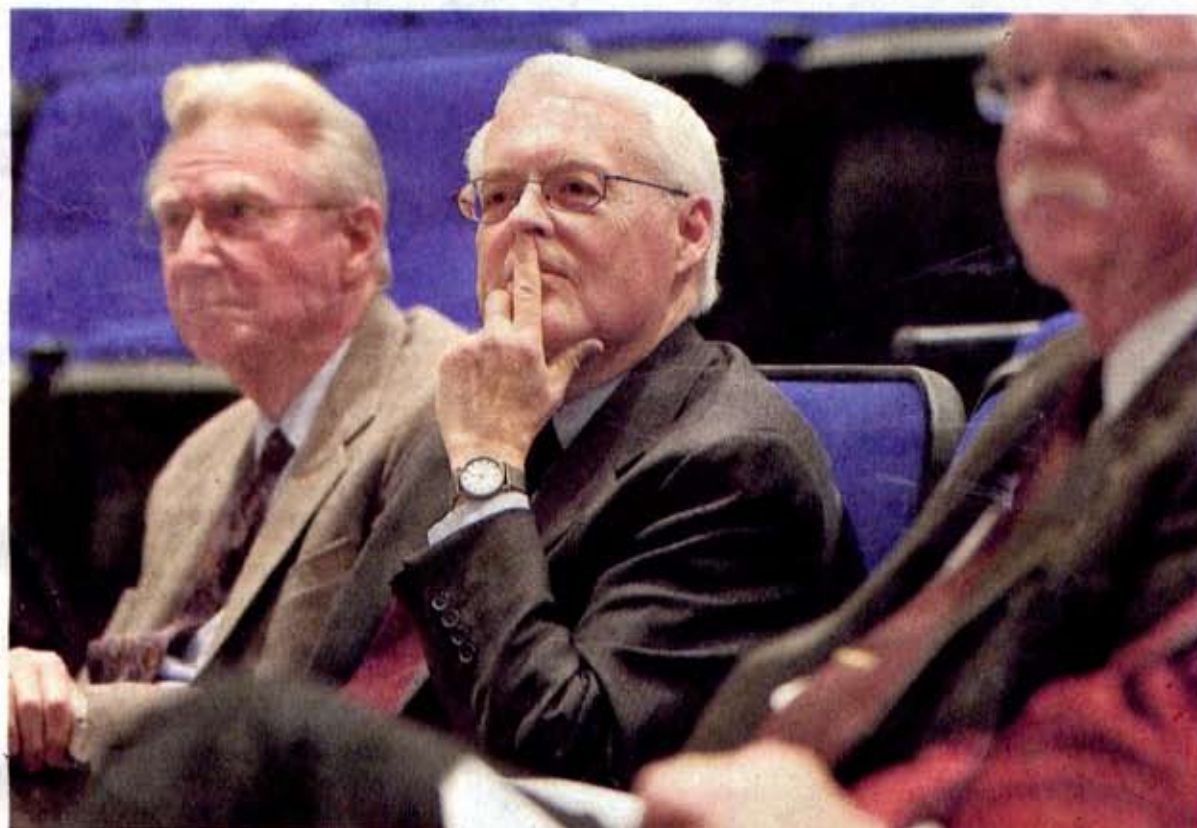


Writing group gives Hershey Med doctors  
an avenue to portray their human side

# A prescription for expression

BY NANCY ESHELMAN • For The Patriot-News



Above: From left, Drs. George Simms, J.O. Ballard and Gordon Kauffman listen to a reading by Dr. Michael Green at the Humanities First Fridays event in December at the Penn State Hershey College of Medicine. They are part of the college's Physician Writers Group that formed two years ago under the guidance of Kimberly Myers, an associate professor in the Department of Humanities. Right: Myers and Kauffman, left, talk following the readings. Dr. Joseph Gascho, back, in red, is also part of the group.



PHOTOS BY JOE HERMITT, The Patriot-News

Doctors have feelings, too. A group of physicians at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center is sharing theirs through poetry. The word that crops up most when they discuss their writing is "therapeutic." Their poems deal with losing patients, losing face and facing their own mortality.

The Penn State College of Medicine Physician Writers Group got its start two years ago when Kimberly Myers, an associate professor in the Department of Humanities, saw a poem by cardiologist Joseph Gascho in a medical journal and asked if he'd like to talk about his writing.

Soon they were joined by doctors J.O. Ballard, whose specialty is hematology/oncology; Michael Green, internal medicine; Gordon Kauffman, surgery; and George Simms, family medicine.

Myers would assign a genre and the doctors would write. Poems traveled back and forth through e-mail, and the group would meet every other week for face-to-face discussion and criticism.

"It takes amazing courage for people at the top of their game to come into a room and be vulnerable and give and accept criticism," Myers said. "It's also bearing part of their souls."

Writing is no easy task, Myers said. "They worked for hours, alone and together, to find just the right word and just the right tone," she said.

The result included poems such as Ballard's "Night Call," which relays the story of a 30-year-old leukemia patient nearing the end of life. Ballard responds to a middle of the night call, knowing that as a physician, he is helpless to stop the inevitable.

*"The rough road to remission no longer passable  
Relief and sleep are what we seek  
I'm not sure why I go.  
To be there."*

EXCERPT FROM "NIGHT CALL," by J.O. Ballard

Simms wrote a long piece on his feelings about moving to a retirement community, where staff can tend to the needs of his wife. He looks around, at canes, walkers and wheelchairs, "the paraphernalia of the old and infirm," and works hard to convince himself that he's different.

"I am not one of them and I am not a has-been," he wrote.

So he accepted a job overseeing the community's hospice, which lets him be a doctor and lets him feel needed. "For the time being that's the way I want it to be," he wrote.

One of Green's poems, "Round and Round," tells the story of a bout of dizziness he suffered. Being ill, he said, shook his confidence.

"That night, more than anything, I felt scared," he wrote.

As all writers know, submission isn't a guarantee of acceptance. Many of the doctors have sent their

work to journals only to receive rejection letters.

Ballard said his "Fall through Fading Light" has been his nemesis for a year. Although it's been rejected by three journals, he continues to work at perfecting the story of a dying woman in the ICU. He's currently experimenting with adding a stanza.

The doctors say they wouldn't have had the perseverance without Myers.

"Before this, if I had something rejected, I'd have never gone back to it," Gascho said.

Although poetry is a newfound passion for the five doctors, all have been involved in other artistic endeavors.

Gascho, the cardiologist, is a photographer who has taken about 50 portraits of patients for a permanent gallery in his offices. He photographs patients in their homes, in their surroundings.

"Writing and photography are the same thing, where you try to open yourself to an image. To me the two are very much alike, and hopefully you see something that you open your eyes to," he said.

Green said he was always involved with art. "Then college and medical school and life took over," he said. In addition to writing poetry, he dabbles in watercolors and photography.

Kauffman also takes photographs, particularly on medical mission trips to Africa that have been part of his life for the past six or seven years. In addition, he sings.

Simms' love of music takes him to nursing homes, where he performs as a cellist. "I love it well. I don't play it well, but I love it well," he said.

Meanwhile, Ballard can be found at 6 a.m. most days practicing the pipe organ in his church. It's a skill he acquired in college that he put aside for many years. He describes his mission now as "relearning."

All of the doctors say they wouldn't have pursued poetry to this degree without Myers' prodding.

"She gives us the sense that she sees potential in us," Gascho said, comparing Myers to an enzyme, which in medicine changes things "from this to that."

"Being a physician isn't only about the science. To express yourself clearly is crucial," said Green, who disputed the notion that the humanities and medicine are separate and different. "This counters the feeling that 21st-century medicine is devoid of a soul."

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