

Medicine's human side exposed by Dal's poet-in-residence

The Medical Humanities Program at Dalhousie medical school took a little licence with its artist-in-residence program when it engaged a poet to expose students to the human side of medicine.

When Toronto-based writer Glen Downie took up the 2-month position last fall, he had a recently published collection of medical poems in hand. *Wishbone Dance* contains more than 50 poems, many previously published, that draw largely on his observations and experiences from 11 years as a social worker at a hospital and cancer clinic in Vancouver.

"Working in a medical area is very intense," says Downie. "It's people in crisis, it's matters of life and death a lot of the time. It would be difficult for a writer to avoid stuff like that because it makes such a strong impression on you and affects you personally."

Learning how to process daily encounters with serious illness and death is one of the things medical humanities professor Dr. Jock Murray hoped students would gain from Downie's pres-



Glen Downie: new ways of seeing things

ence. "Poetry captures the essence of things," says Murray, who always intended the artist-in-residence program to be broad in scope. "It gives students a way of thinking about the tremendous events that they see in the lives of patients every day. Poetry isn't easy. It makes students stop and think."

Downie's poems are sure to provide ample food for thought. Touching, insightful and usually sobering, many revisit events and routines in the lives of critically ill or dying patients, surviving family members, and hospital and clinic personnel.

For example, "Sudden Infant Death" portrays a doctor's grief and helplessness as he arrives in the ER with his unconscious baby. "The Book of the Dead" recalls Downie's response to the monthly cancer-clinic ritual of discarding dead patients' files, while "Living with Cancer" observes a patient's fears during his first support-group meeting.

Downie says committing such images and events to paper has allowed him to work through often trying professional experiences. "It is one way to retrieve what goes by too quickly, and have the time to mull it over," he adds. "Sometimes the pace of events in a hospital is very fast. You have to do what you do and get on to the next person."

Downie, who has published 3 other collections of poetry, doesn't limit his writing to medical topics, although he knows his medical poems have the widest appeal. During his stay at Dalhousie, he hoped they would help teach students the art of listening to patients.

"One of the things that is common to both the writing and reading of poetry and the practice of medicine is you have to attend very carefully to what's being said. There are so many conditions that doctors can't cure and can't alleviate totally that we have to at least be able to offer patients the respect and consideration of full attention." —

Nancy Robb, Halifax

Candy killed after complaints from mentally disabled Americans

Nestlé USA recently stopped marketing Tangy Taffy bars under the brand names Loony Jerry, Weird Wally and Psycho Sam after a campaign by the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI). The group argued that the candies' names and packaging promoted the stigmatization of people with mental health problems.

For more than a year the US mental health awareness organization had unsuccessfully tried to persuade the food giant to drop the names, which NAMI considered to have "long-standing stereotypical associations with persons suffering from mental illnesses."

Nestlé USA officials responded that the names were simply "rooted in a silly, playful humour" that was intended to "amuse children and give personality to our cartoon characters" rather than ridicule people suffering from mental disorders.

However, it wasn't until late last summer, when NAMI threatened to drop its behind-the-scenes negotiations and mount a grassroots boycott by "stigmabusters," that Nestlé agreed to reconsider its naming decision.

Last September Nestlé's consumer services manager, Cathy Johnson, informed NAMI that the company had decided to stop producing the offensive products. In explaining its reversal, Johnson informed NAMI: "As with all businesses, we evaluate our brands and change business strategies based on consumer preferences and trends."

NAMI executive director Laurie Flynn applauded Nestlé's decision, saying: "Mental illnesses are not silly, playful or humorous." — *Gil Kezwer, Toronto*