



Narrative-Based
Medicine Lab

Safety and Courage in NBM

Narrative-Based Medicine (NBM) is a mode of healthcare practice and enquiry premised on the understanding that, knowingly and unknowingly, practitioners and patients together construct narratives over the course of their encounters. These stories – with their multiple characters, conflicts and desires, subtleties and miscommunications – affect the nature and meaning of health events in all our lives.

Getting better at working with stories of all kinds (acquiring “narrative competence”) has a powerful impact on both patient care and physician/clinician fulfilment. Our mission is to utilize narrative methods (reading, writing and other forms of art-making and appreciation) to promote creativity, inter-subjective skills and the ability to receive and understand the complex and often difficult stories of others.

Stories stretch our world view and enhance empathy by inviting us to challenge personal blind spots, biases and privileges, all the while examining and deepening our own personal and professional values.

As with other activities within and at the intersection of medicine and the humanities, this work can lead to difficult ethical, pedagogical and professional questions. These may not be entirely resolvable, but keeping the following guidelines in mind will help us address them in a respectful and transparent manner. Safety and courage go hand in hand: we will try to make this space safe enough that everyone feels able to participate fully and bravely.

The key principles for ethical and professional practice guiding the work of the Narrative-Based Medicine Lab that we’ll try to manifest are:

Confidentiality:

When writing, reading, and discussing work for this group, please bear in mind that any creative or reflective work inspired by clinical experiences should be free of names and identifiers (including those of patients, colleagues, and students). When reading and listening to each other’s work, be sure not to share any identifying details with anyone in or outside the group.

More than this, please reflect on the point made by Dr. Allan Peterkin in his essay “Primum non Nocere: On Accountability in Narrative-Based Medicine”:

Creative work inspired by clinical encounters must continue to reflect enduring ethical standards related to patient confidentiality, to ensure non-exploitation of patients for personal gain by physicians, and to foster public trust in the profession.

As Dr. Peterkin says: between the stethoscope and the pen, the stethoscope takes priority.

For more information and resources, please see **Ethics of Writing about Practice**.



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Sensitivity:

Writing workshops can go in unexpected directions. Participants may share very personal work, or imaginative work that draws on personal experience in complicated ways. Narrative-based medicine often deals with issues related to illness, loss, suffering, or death. If you feel you might be traumatized (or retraumatized) by being exposed to such material, please protect yourself by taking heed of trigger warnings other participants may offer, but be aware that this is an imperfect process – in a workshop, we can only request everyone do their best; we can't control participant actions and reactions.

NBM is a growing interdisciplinary field that emphasizes creativity, complexity and humility. We are a community of writers, readers, and listeners. Here are some guidelines for responding to each other's work in a respectful and productive way drawn from *Portfolio To Go: 1000+ Reflective Writing Prompts and Provocations for Clinical Learners* by Allan D. Peterkin (University of Toronto Press, 2016).

- Be respectful and open when listening to other points of view
- Keep comments about other's work specific and concise (and directed to the writing)
- Emphasize strengths in just written work
- Respect boundaries; it's up to the writer to decide how much they want to say about their piece
- Contribute to problem solving around difficult or troubling stories including directing the writer to references or resources

Inclusion and Accountability:

We recognize that we live in unequal times and will strive to ensure that participants from all socio-economic and religious backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual and gender identities are encouraged to participate in our programming, as an effort on the part of the NBM Lab to increase respect, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

We will try to encourage the NBM principles of openness, respect for diverse perspectives, and generous listening. If respectful communication breaks down, we will try to use emerging tensions as “teaching moments” and take concrete steps to create an inclusive and productive learning space.

As clinicians, colleagues and educators, we seek to improve the healthcare experience of all of our patients/clients. We are accountable to them, to our communities and to the health professions we represent; we all bear witness to each other. The NBM Lab offers mechanisms of accountability via Allan Peterkin, the Academic Program Director, NBM Programs, Continuing Professional Development, Temerty Faculty of Medicine, the [University of Toronto Code of Conduct for Learners, Educators, and Visitors](#) and the [Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters](#).

Please contact CPD.Programs@utoronto.ca to make an appointment with the Academic Program Director.

Finally - but foremost - let's remember compassion. Healthcare professionals are confronted daily with suffering, trauma and pain. At the Narrative-Based Medicine Lab, as elsewhere, we seek to improve the lives of those affected by suffering. We must also do all we can to make it possible for us to care better for each other as colleagues. Respecting each other's stories, acting with integrity and professionalism, and ensuring that all those who wish to can speak and participate in our learning activities are essential to creating a safe and brave learning environment at the NBM Lab.

With assistance from Jana Lazor, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Toronto