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As if the Field of Medicine Weren't Complicated Enough: A Genre Analysis

In the field of medicine, advancement is the focus. Individuals aspire to develop cutting edge techniques, perform at the highest levels, and implement the greatest quality of patient care possible. Physicians are considered the trailblazers of this field -- expected to continuously seek a greater understanding of the complexities of the human body. Even more so, after years of schooling followed by what can seem like a lifetime of rigorous training, they are expected to lead. This role as a leader implies a level of responsibility to carry a team, execute a game plan, and act as a backbone for all individuals involved. For most, this responsibility can appear daunting, but for those who do pursue a career in medicine, it presents an opportunity to utilize autonomy to drive one's passion: a desire to help others foster individual health and longevity of life. Ironically enough, physicians do not instill this same level of importance on their health and well-being. Over the last fifty years, physician burnout has become a topic of much debate within healthcare and popular culture. This topic has been featured on several reputable websites, found in novels, and has even been investigated using scientific techniques through national research databases. This topic raises a myriad of questions and allows an opportunity to analyze the genre and rhetoric in which these sources address this matter.

Although multiple articles, books, tweets, and even publishings could be called upon to analyze rhetoric within this topic, three texts that will be used throughout this analysis include: the popular article "The Unspoken Causes of Physician Burnout" written by Robert Pearl M.D. for *Forbes Magazine*; the scholarly article "Resident Physician Burnout: Is There Hope?" written by several physicians for the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health; and the timeless novel, *The House of God*

written Samuel Shem, M.D., Ph.D. All three texts share a similar topic of interest yet are variable in their intended audience, author credibility, and use of voice.

In the *Forbes* article written by Robert Pearl M.D., Pearl focuses heavily on introducing physician burnout and (as the title would suggest) the causes of it. His article begins with the use of evidence-based facts as a hook and this use of supporting information is continued throughout the rest of his piece. This strategy enables Pearl to craft a logical argument, giving him a platform to stand on as author. Given that Pearl is known for his role as a physician, but even more so a businessman in recent years, it is clear that this article is geared towards an audience of a similar business background. In paragraph 27 of the article, Pearl shifts focus directly towards a personal anecdote about results obtained from time spent at the company of which he used to run. Not only this, Pearl implements statistics that solidify techniques used while he was running this company as seen here:

Although consistently poor performance must be addressed to protect patients, this shift in focus—from “failure spotting” to “strengths finding”—helped physicians in The Permanente Medical Group (TPMG) rapidly improve their clinical outcomes during my tenure as CEO. Using this approach, we achieved the top U.S. ranking for quality scores from the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA). And whereas overall physician satisfaction rates throughout the United States declined from 2007 to 2017, more than 90% of TPMG physicians remained “very satisfied” with their work, according to internal surveys (27).

The use of a personal anecdote and statistics about quality indicate that Pearl approaches this issue in healthcare with a similar mindset. Through his work at The Permanente Medical Group, he was able to implement a solution to battle poor performance and obtain results. This experience as a physician turned businessman who is directly making an impact on the field awards Pearl great credibility. His ability to speak upon the topic using his own experience indicates his level of expertise. Pearl also

references several sources which include Harvard, CMS administrator Don Berwick, and Stanford researcher Carol Dweck, making it clear that Pearl has done intensive research for this article.

Pearl effectively brings this article together through the use of his voice. He employs a personal yet informative voice:

...they focus more time and energy trying to prevent disease and manage chronic illnesses. The tools for these tasks are impressive in their design and effectiveness. Thanks to advances in science, primary care doctors today are equipped with evidence-based approaches powered by computerized algorithms that produce superior clinical outcomes and save patient lives. But to primary care doctors, it all feels like “cookbook medicine” (17).

Here, the text portrays Pearl’s main point that primary care doctors are no longer feeling the same job fulfillment they once did, but he refrains from the use of complex verbiage or medical jargon. His intended audience of business professionals would be able to enjoy this piece.

Medicine is a field based on the use of the scientific method to explore possible outcomes and obtain results. With that being said, research is an instrumental tool to achieve this exploration and it is common for a research study to be obtained on almost any issue. In the scholarly article, “Resident Physician Burnout: Is There Hope?” research of over 150 texts obtained from medical literature databases such as PubMed and MEDLINE found that while burnout is an issue within our healthcare system, there are few solutions available. This article is most clearly geared towards individuals who are in the healthcare field or have a background in some form of research. This is evident from the use of graphs and other visual aids that serve to present data found in the study to the reader in a clear yet concise way. These aids are not photographs or meant to provide any form of aesthetic to the article.

The purpose of this research article centers upon physician burnout yet takes a different approach than that of Pearl’s popular article. Here, researchers are collecting data, analyzing them, and presenting

them. This piece serves to educate readers on this topic, “Despite the potentially serious personal and professional consequences of burnout, few interventions exist to combat this problem. Prospective, controlled studies are needed to examine the effect of interventions to manage burnout among resident physicians” (McGray et al. 626). This level of extensive research makes clear that these authors have great credibility. All authors listed are physicians, indicating they have participated in the field and more than likely encountered similar experiences their relationship pertains to.

The authors’ voices throughout this piece portray them as both scholars and experts. These individuals use straight to the point sentence structure with little flair to keep the focus on core information found in the article: “It [burnout] may be seen in medical students and physicians in practice. The prevalence of burnout in a sample of US medical students ranged between 43%–45%.<sup>12, 13</sup> Between 22%–60% of practicing specialists and general practitioners are reported to have experienced burnout.<sup>2–4,14</sup>” (McGray et al. 627). The use of data and reference to textual evidence aids this informative voice; there is no use of ornate detail, and the tone is very concise.

Two out of the three sources thus far have presented themselves as being geared towards an audience of physicians, businessmen, and researchers. It is not uncommon for literary pieces in the medical field to stay within the field only, until novels such as *The House of God* began to grip the interest of non-medically-inclined individuals. This novel was written by Samuel Shem, M.D., Ph.D. and offers a raunchy approach to physician burnout. Shem uses a humorous tone that can keep any reader engaged and ensures the use of medical terminology that is followed by easy-to-understand explanations. Perhaps most apparent is Shem’s use of his personalized vocabulary to describe events in the hospital during the main character’s internship year:

...Molly let go at the same time, Sophie uncoiled and looked like she was about to GO TO GROUND from just below the Orthopedic Height but we caught her in time.  
Embarrassed, my cockiness splattered in sweat all over Sophie, I told Levy to stop

smirking and get the Fat Man. Fats came in, in two shakes had Molly expose herself and Sophie's porcine back, and, humming a TV commercial that sounded like "I Wish I were an Oscar Weiner weiner," with a smooth and effortless Sam Snead stroke sliced through the fat and popped into the subarachnoid space. I was amazed at his virtuosity. We watched the clear spinal fluid drip out. Fats took me aside, and like a coach put his arm around my shoulders and whispered: "You were way off the midline. You hit either kidney or gut. Pray kidney, 'cause if it's gut, it's Infection City, and she may suffer the ultimate TURF, to pathology" (71).

This approach effectively grips the attention of the reader -- regardless if an individual went through an internship year or never planned on it, it is still possible for them to connect and understand the feelings Shem was attempting to portray. It is also clear to the reader the tone that the Fat Man is using. He is clearly expressing a matter-of-fact tone despite one of his residents may have incorrectly treated a patient, furthering this idea of physician burnout taking a toll on an individual.

Not only this, Shem often refers to several of the relationships the main character forms with his fellow colleagues (most of which are the nursing staff). Shem documents this multiple times but one instance is seen here: "There was a knock at the door, and then two more, which was our code. There in nursing uniform, were Angel and Molly. I watched Thunder Thighs [Angel] throw her arms around the Runt and kiss him ... Angie Wangie took his hand and put it under her skirt, cupping it around her stormy ass ... In a gomer falsetto I wailed HALP NURSE HALP NURSE HALP and they came to me" (185-186). The use of this content is not seen or even remotely visible within the other sources, yet still plays into the idea of physician burnout. While many physicians engage in relations with their colleagues, it can be presumed that many do so in order to *feel* something. Shem touches on this brilliantly, using a casual yet humorous tone that makes clear to the reader how the main character is feeling.

Shem documents his own experience, leaving him a highly credible author because he went through and may still experience physician burnout. Shem states in the introduction of his novel, “I wrote the book because I could *not* write it; I had to report back on what *still* seems the worst year of my life” (6). This credibility is important, as it is difficult for one to speak upon what can be an emotional topic for some. Even more so, Shem’s writing of this novel indicates his devotion to this issue. He even states in the introduction: “How can we change it?” Two ways: firstly, one on an individual level, by learning how to stay human in the system; secondly, on a collective level, by taking action” (5). Here, Shem is taking action; using his stance as a physician who went through this experience and as an established author to continue to speak up about this issue.

Shem’s novel is a highly regarded memoir intended for all audiences, his credibility as a physician himself is clear, and his tone lends to the popularity and versatility of his book.

Despite the noticeable genre differences found within all three sources, they utilize their individualized genres as a way to promote involvement from the audience. This is important in bringing this national issue to light along with continuing support for the future of American healthcare and beyond. To highlight one source, *The House of God* has become one of the most highly recommended novels for undergraduate students to read before entering medical school because of the level of truth to it -- a level of esteem the other two articles would not be likely to achieve. This is important to note because Shem created a valuable reference in the form of a popular genre that was made available to a broad audience; one of the few resources available that allow a first-hand look into medicine. With that being said, one commonality between them is their goal to inform and raise awareness about physician burnout throughout the United States. Each source is intended for a specific audience, portrays an effective tone for that intended audience, and each source relies on credible authors to expel this information to the public.

Works Cited

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