

EDITORIAL

Why *Pediatric Research* needs “Insights”



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Just like there are many ways to describe an elephant depending on which body part the blind men touch in the well-known parable, there are many ways to experience, describe, approach, and cope with childhood illness. As pediatric researchers we are intimately familiar with ways to explore its biologic origins or design helpful interventions. But of course, there are other ways to contribute to the overall agenda to improve child health and not all are “scientific”.

The “Insights” section of PEDIATRIC RESEARCH intends to provide space for work from outside the confined limits of hypothesis testing or research synthesis. As of the time of this writing (mid-October 2023) we have collected more than 100 pieces in the section; you can browse them here: <https://www.nature.com/pr/articles?type=insights>.

The range of work we consider for “Insights” is deliberately broad. We’d like to hear from parents about their experience in and with pediatrics and pediatricians, as much as we’d like to learn from children about theirs. We’d like to publish poetry and short stories from creative writers who have something to say about the lives of sick children or their caretakers, about observations made by pediatric nurses and pediatricians, social workers, psychologists. We’d like to print images, drawings, photos, paintings that depict facets of pediatrics and pediatric research. We’d like to share those stories on how we find catharsis in narrative writings. And we want to hear from academicians in neighboring fields collectively known as the “medical humanities” and learn from their thinking about the very special and sometimes tragic world at the intersection of child life and ill health. We also invite personal homages and obituaries, as well as general commentaries on relevant issues in the field.

WHY DO WE THINK THAT “INSIGHTS” ARE IMPORTANT FOR PEDIATRIC RESEARCH?

First and foremost, we want to offer a platform to those who wish to express their thoughts and feelings about pediatrics and pediatric research in ways that go beyond the accounts offered in regular research articles. In other words, we want to express our intent to be inclusive by making room for contributions outside the realm of basic science reports and clinical investigations.

Second, we all know from personal experience that the life of a researcher can be extremely rewarding in some ways but also limited in others. The research bubble that includes proposal writing, data collection, analytic thinking, and publication activities rarely allows the individual researcher to pause and reflect, to think outside the “grants in, papers out” box. The “Insights” section of *Pediatric Research* is intended to offer a reason to pause, a perspective to reflect on, a topic outside the box to consider.

Third, we strongly believe that looking at pediatrics and pediatric research through a parent’s, patient’s, poet’s, artist’s, or

philosopher’s lens can be very instructive. In fact, we believe it is good for pediatricians to be a poet, artist, or philosopher.

Perhaps the most prominent example of a pediatrician poet was the Pulitzer prize-winning William Carlos Williams, M.D., whose “Red Wheelbarrow” is arguably one of the best-known examples of American modernist verse. Reportedly, Williams wrote it after he had visited a sick child and, sitting at their bedside, looked out the window and saw, well, a red wheelbarrow. (It is difficult to find out whether the poem is copyrighted, but the original is not too far from, albeit infinitely better than, “So much depends / upon // a blue lawn / mower // covered with saw / dust // beside the brown / cattle”.) Look up the original and you will understand why so much has been written about the poem. You will also understand why we think that after having taking Williams’ perspective no red wheelbarrow will ever look the same. Moreover, after having made the acquaintance of Williams’ “wheelbarrow” and the story of its author, at least some readers will never look at pediatricians the same way again. We also believe that at least some readers will never think about scholarship the same way after having read the poem “scholarship” by pediatrician and poetess Irène Mathieu, M.D., M.P.H., in *Virginia Quarterly Review* (2020).

Scientific progress is not only achieved by following the rules of science, but also by changing them if need be. To those who are less than convinced that “non-scientific” perspectives do not belong in scientific journals we strongly recommend the article “Why Science Needs Philosophy” by Lucie Laplane and colleagues, prominently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2019;116:3948–52). The authors argue that philosophy can (1) offer conceptual clarification, (2) critique scientific assumptions and help formulate novel theories, and (3) support paradigm shifts such as the transition “from behaviorism to cognitivism and computationalism in the 1960s” (p. 3949). Philosophy is not non-science; it is epi-science in the sense of being about scientific thinking in an all-encompassing way.

Moving to the visual arts, consider three paintings from the late 19th century. “The Sick Child” by Edvard Munch (1885) is a perfect example of how a painting can communicate instantaneously how a mother’s desperation in the face of her child’s sickness can add another layer of terror to the child’s experience of illness. Another painting by the same title (J. Bond Francisco, 1893) depicts the fraction of a moment where we stop whatever we are doing to focus all our attention on the patient to gauge the situation and look for the slightest change that might need our attention. “The Doctor” by Luke Fildes (1891) captures the role of the physician during a time when scientific medicine was on the rise in Victorian England, depicting the doctor as an authoritative but gentle, thoughtful, and caring figure inside a small dark cottage together with the sick child’s worried parents. A 1933 reproduction of the painting by Joseph Tomanek leaves Fildes’ composition and details intact but brings more light into the cottage through the small window, thereby increasing the hopeful aspects of the painting that the original may allude to but does not emphasize.

The point is that these paintings, and many other artworks that depict sick children and their caregivers, offer unique, detailed, and, therefore, strongly personal perspectives, capable of enhancing anyone's access to the story of illness in childhood. Fast forward to the present day, you may want to start exploring "Graphic Medicine for Kids & Teens" by Moni Barrette in the School Library Journal (January 2021). Some of the titles reviewed in this article may be eye- or even mind-opening not only for children and parents but also for their pediatricians.

We believe that there are many epi-scientific voices out there that have something interesting to say about pediatrics and pediatric research. Consider this editorial a standing invitation to send us your work for the "Insights" section. We'd like to think that every little bit of art, poetry, or philosophy we publish will make a

small but important contribution to the overall goal of creating a healthier world for children and their caregivers.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.