

# The Physical Examination as Ritual

## Social Sciences and Embodiment in the Context of the Physical Examination



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### KEYWORDS

- Physical examination • Ritual • Physician-patient relationship • Embodiment
- Social Sciences and Medicine

### KEY POINTS

- The privilege of examining a patient is a skill of value beyond its diagnostic utility.
- A thorough physical examination is an important ritual that benefits both patients and physicians; it helps to satisfy a patient's elemental need to be cared for, and a physician's need to make work meaningful.
- The concept of embodiment helps one understand how illness and pain further define and shape the lived experiences of individuals in the context of their race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.
- A sophisticated understanding of the importance of ritual in medicine, and of placebo effects, reaffirms the significance of the physical examination to the process of building strong physician-patient relationships.

### INTRODUCTION

A skilled physical examination in response to a specific patient complaint can be diagnostically effective, allowing one to narrow the differential diagnosis, pluck the “low hanging fruit,” and come to a definitive diagnosis. However, in the present era, simple phenotypic observations such as café au lait spots, Horner syndrome, or breast masses are often missed due to a medical culture that does not teach or test bedside skills in the same way that cognitive knowledge is tested and assessed.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore,

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Disclosure Statement: Neither author has any relationship with a commercial company that has a direct financial interest in subject matter or materials discussed in article or with a company making a product.

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Med Clin N Am 102 (2018) 425–431  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mcna.2017.12.004>

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the physical examination remains underutilized and increasingly threatened by advances in diagnostic testing. As highlighted in the recent Institute of Medicine's report on improving diagnosis in health care, simple oversights in the examination can lead to unnecessary and costly forms of medical error.<sup>2</sup>

The value of the physical examination in building and maintaining the physician-patient relationship is not often studied or discussed. It is telling, however, that patients' complaints about physicians often include words that are revealing of their sense of the importance of the examination and the skill of the person conducting it: "the doctor never touched me!" or "the doctor never laid a hand on me!"<sup>3</sup> The examination of a patient is an honored ritual of caring and healing; the privilege of touch is given to few other professions in society. The authors believe that the failure to connect with patients, the lack of meaningful time spent with patients, and the loss of critical rituals all add to the epidemic of disillusionment and burnout in the medical profession.

A 2016 literature review on the importance of the physical examination points to a disconnect in the medical and social science literature when it comes to the significance and value of the examination in clinical settings.<sup>3</sup> For example, the simple practice of having a patient disrobe can result in feelings that one's identity is being stripped away. The concept of embodiment, as understood through an anthropological lens, can help physicians appreciate anew the importance of the examination and widen its practice. Studies of the neurobiological effects of rituals at the bedside (setting, appearance, tone of voice) suggest that the notion of placebo without a placebo might well apply to the physical examination when it is done with skill and consideration.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI) and deep machine learning will change the landscape even further.<sup>4</sup> AI has great potential to relieve some of what is burdensome in medicine, and it is hoped that if utilized well, and with intelligent input (ie, human intelligence before artificial intelligence, or HI before AI), it may allow for more meaningful patient time. However, certain vital expressions of empathy, understanding, and love remain a unique ritual between human beings, not humans and machines. Human-to-human rituals in medicine benefit not only patients; they also help to relieve the dysphoria and disillusion existing in a medical system that is often technology proficient but emotionally deficient.<sup>5-9</sup>

## THE PHYSICAL EXAMINATION IN MEDICINE AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

In a 2016 literature review of the physical examination and the physician-patient relationship, Iida and Nishigori identified 1447 studies focused on the physical examination in both the medical and social science databases, selecting 205 studies for further review.<sup>3</sup> They found that although most of the medical literature they reviewed valued the physical examination as a means of building and maintaining the patient-physician relationship, these positive assessments were largely based on opinion rather than quantitative data.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, many existing ethnographic studies of the physical examination highlight the ways that patients often experience such examinations as invasive.<sup>3</sup> These studies unveil power differentials, looking at ways that institutions within society maintain social hierarchies.<sup>10</sup> Simple practices such as using the scientific language of medicine or turning one's back toward a patient to type notes on a computer can feel alienating to a patient, driving a wedge between patients and their physicians. Furthermore, practices like disrobing to don a paper gown can literally strip a patient of his or her identity. What is clearly needed is more scholarship in this area to prospectively assess the importance of the physician-patient relationship. It is the authors' belief that interdisciplinary studies using qualitative and

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