

# Exploring the Ethics of Structural and Social Determinants of Health: A Virtual, Multimedia Elective for Third-Year Medical Students

Anjali Vora, MD/MPH, Sarah Collins, PhD, Alexis Boulter, MD, Rebecca Duron, MD/MSPH and Reeni Abraham, MD

## Introduction

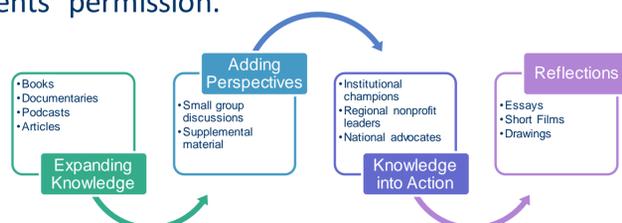


SSDOH Homunculus Man  
Color Drawing by MS3  
Syed Rizvi

Structural and social determinants of health (SSDOH) contribute more to our patients' morbidity and mortality than traditional clinical factors; yet medical schools' curricula do not consistently address these topics or parallel patient narratives with basic science and clinical education. We developed a four-week, 14-session virtual course during the COVID-19 pandemic to introduce clerkship students to key SSDOH challenges, which also served as our organizing curricular themes: institutional racism and incarceration, gender and gender identity, childhood trauma, and immigration.

## Methods

Books, articles, film, podcasts and other media were selected by faculty course directors and residents to complement each theme. Students reviewed these resources prior to the small-group sessions. Fourteen virtual discussions were held over four weeks with five sessions led by the students and nine led by the faculty and residents. Weekly panel discussions with local and national interprofessional leaders whose work centers on the weekly theme were invited to share their experience with advocacy work. The students reflected on the themes which most affected them and how these themes would shape their future practices as physicians using visual art or narratives, and they shared their final projects during the last session. All art included on this poster are selections from the students' final projects and are shared with the students' permission.



## Results

The students' review of the educational materials suggests that the majority of assignments influenced the students' perceptions of the selected SSDOH themes. In addition, survey results demonstrated the success of utilizing different types of humanities media. The overall course rating was 4.83 on a scale of 1 to 5.

Ratings for Humanities Resources	Rating*
13th (on Netflix)	3.0
"The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down" by Anne Fadiman	3.0
"The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog" by Bruce D. Perry	2.8
Unnatural Causes (Streaming via school library)	2.8
Resilience (Streaming via school library)	2.5
Curbsiders Internal Medicine Podcast, Ep 158 "Medicine and Incarceration"	2.5
This American Life Podcast episode "Get Back to Where You Belong"	2.5
The Urban Institute's LGBTQ Youth and Survival Sex	2.3
"My Own Country" by Abraham Verghese	2.2
Atlantic article by former Children's peds resident about healthcare at the border	2.2
Scheduled vs. Emergency Only Dialysis	2.0
The Endocrine Society's Guidelines on Hormone Therapy	1.7
"The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks" by Rebecca Skloot	1.3

\*Ratings: 1=Do not recommend; 2=Recommend; 3= Highly Recommend

SSDOH Topic	Speaker	Rating*
Week 1: Institutional Racism and Incarceration	Speaker 1 - Social worker, clinic at large county hospital	4.0
	Speaker 2 - Physician, addiction medicine and jail health	5.0
	Speaker 3 - Med-Peds physician, HIV clinic	4.2
Week 2: Gender and Gender Identity	Speaker 4 - Endocrinologist, transgender clinic	3.0
	Speaker 5 - CEO/LMSW of a local domestic violence shelter	4.8
	Speaker 6 - Therapist, foster care clinic	4.5
Week 3: Childhood Trauma	Speaker 7 - Dietitian, local clinic for people experiencing homelessness	4.0
	Speaker 8 - Employee/JD of a local non-profit organization to reduce recidivism and facilitate community reentry	4.8
	Speaker 9 - Researcher/PhD specializing in SDOH, i.e. food security	4.5
Week 4: Immigration	Speaker 10 - Nephrologist, local county hospital which serves large unfunded immigrant population	3.8
	Speaker 11 - Pediatrician specializing in immigration and foster care	4.0
	Speaker 12 - Employee of the "International Rescue Committee"	4.5

\*Ratings: 1=I missed this; 2=Not at all; 3=Somewhat; 4=A lot; 5=It changed my entire perspective.



Adverse Childhood Events  
Pencil Drawing by  
MS3 Naveen Balakrishnan

## Discussion and Limitations

The course was constructed in less than four weeks to meet virtual academic needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative comments demonstrate that the small-group nature of the course promoted a 'safe space' for candid sharing and robust discussion. The contributions from health advocates working in differing populations and specialties sparked discussions about the complex intersectionality of SSDOH, illustrating a feasible way to incorporate inter-professional learning into medical education. The major limitation of our course is the small class size and thus comments may not be generalizable to a larger student body. Moreover, students who chose to take the course may have been a self-selected group already interested in the topic.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to the additional course directors for substantive contributions to the course development: Drs. Stephanie Brinker, Heidi Roman, Mridula Nadamuni and Liane Sadler. Thank you to all of the medical students who brought their whole selves to this inaugural course, including those whose artwork is shared here. Thank you to Agatha Villegas for invaluable contributions as the course administrator. For any additional questions, please reach out to [anjali.vora@utsouthwestern.edu](mailto:anjali.vora@utsouthwestern.edu).



America  
Pencil Drawing by  
MS3 Reshma Narain