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The Literature, Arts and Medicine Database: A review

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The Literature, Arts and Medicine database is a multimedia listing of prose, poetry, film, video and art that is planned to be dynamic, accessible and comprehensive. The database is for use for teaching and research in medical humanities. This multi-institutional project was started by the New York University School of Medicine in the United States in 1993 and in 2006 was converted to a dynamic web format.

The URL of the database is http://litmed.med.nyu.edu.. On opening the database, it opens to the page 'What's new'. This page details new developments in the database. On May 11, 2007 the database contained 123 art annotations, 193 film annotations, 2294 literature and 1 theater annotation, 72 artists, 1382 authors and used 137 keywords. The editor-in-chief is Dr. Felice Aull, and the coeditors include many prominent figures from the Medical Humanities. The annotators of the database are predominantly the members of the editorial board.

The left hand side of the web page is divided into various sections like art, literature, performing arts, editor's choices and also features a search facility. The arts section has links to a good selection of paintings. Francis Bacon, William Blake, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, Francisco Goya, Edvard Munch, Alice Neel, Pablo Picasso, John Sargent, Vincent van Gogh and Rembrandt are among the more famous.
Each annotation describes the medium, the art form, location of the original, name of the annotator and the date of entry. A summary of the work and a commentary are also given. Keywords are provided, and there are links to the artist and the art. The painting is usually shown in the museum setting and has an accompanying short description.

The literature section constitutes the major portion of the database. 'Meet the authors' provides an alphabetical listing of different authors. There is a short biography of the authors and a selection of his/her output. 'The listening room' enables you to listen to reading of literature. 'The reading room' contains annotations and links to the work. WH Auden, Robert Browning, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Amitav Ghosh, Stephen Hawking, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John

Keats, DH Lawrence, Michael Ondaatje, Wilfred Owen, Edgar Allan Poe, William Shakespeare, Percy Shelley, Jonathan Swift, Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth are the more famous names.

'The performing arts' section has film/video annotations and a small collection of films in the screening room. The Editor's choice section describes the selections of the various editors. Since most of the annotations are by the editors it is just another way of looking at the selections. The editor's biosketch and indexes are interesting.

The search section offers a variety of means to search the database. The annotation search enables you to search for a word or phrase in the annotation, search by title or by art form/genre/medium. The people search enables a search by name, era, people type, ethnic origin, and national origin among others. The keyword list is arranged alphabetically and enables you to search by keyword. The free text search is similar to the Google search which you routinely perform.

The database contains a link to Medical Humanities (MH) with its list of and description of MH syllabi in various medical schools in the United States and Canada. The resource lists various persons and institutions linked to MH. The large majority of MH programs are concentrated in the US and Canada with representations from South Africa, Australia, England, Sweden and Israel. However, as mentioned on the page the selection may not be comprehensive.

The database has been well designed. It has a simple and spare visual format and is easily navigable. I especially liked the heading banner with part of Mona Lisa's face on one side and a book, a film projector and a compact disc on the other. The database can form a source of leisure reading for doctors and with the annotations and other links can introduce practicing doctors to MH. For medical teachers, selections from the database can be sprinkled into their teachings. The database can serve as a wonderful source of support for Asian medical teachers planning to introduce MH in the medical curriculum. It is being used to a great extent by Medical Humanities

educators from North America. A great piece of work! I really enjoyed going through the database.

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