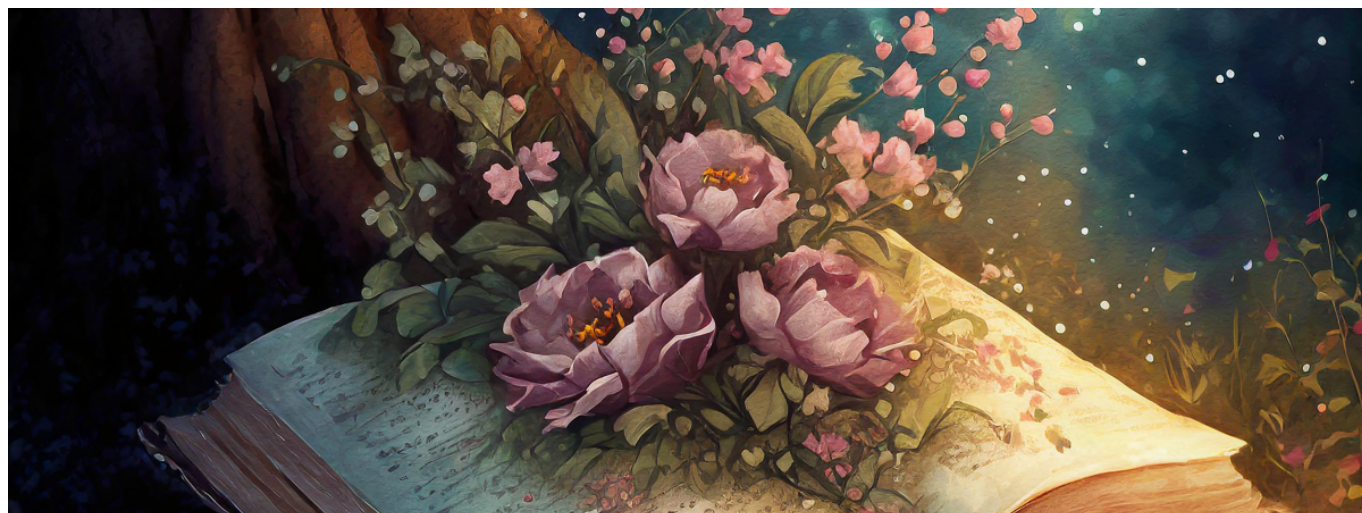


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"Share stories, save lives" writes Dr Courtney Burnett in the American Journal of Medicine, as she celebrates sharing something of her story of living with a brain tumour to a patient terrified to tell his children about his diagnosis. "I can bandage, mend and educate", she writes. "But just as importantly, I can empathetically listen and reflect on the shared stories of our human existence. Seeing his smile is far more satisfying than seeing his Hb result" (Burnett, 2025:758).

When patients tell other patients their stories, something shifts; the 'wounded storyteller' can become the 'wounded healer', writes sociologist Arthur Frank (2013). Recovering from illness, he needed the insights and articulations of other patients to "assure himself he wasn't crazy". "Suffering does not magically disappear when the tale is told," he writes, "but the more stories I heard the less space my own suffering seemed to take up. I felt less alone". Frank describes "letting patients' stories breathe" - to, in a sense, give breath to other patients as stories serve for guide, companion and a "witness to what endures" (Frank, 2010). For children in intensive care, fictional storytelling has been shown to alleviate physical as well as psychological pain. Transported to different narrative worlds, children reported lower ratings of pain and changes in oxytocin and cortisol levels were seen, reflecting increased empathy and lower stress levels (Brockington et al, 2021).

Storytelling is also emerging as a powerful tool for health promotion, especially in communities and cultures that have a strong history of oral traditions, including Latino, African American and Native American/Alaskan communities. In one study of 230 African Americans with uncontrolled hypertension, patient stories on diet modification, medication adherence and mental health, designed to inform and inspire positive health behaviour change, resulted in an 11mm Hg greater reduction in systolic blood pressure than in a control group (Houston et al, 2011).

In one scoping review, co-created, culturally sensitive, and linguistically adapted stories outperformed standard health education for outcomes as diverse as healthy food choices and footcare in diabetes, smoking cessation in pregnancy, cervical cancer screening rates and intention to vaccinate children (Nagarkar et al, 2026). For heart failure patients in Hawaii, "talking story" about fluid intake, medications, alcohol, smoking, drugs and exercise, was

shown to be helpful (Sentell et al, 2020).

Writing story can also bring health benefits. Creative writing is well recognised as therapy to explore difficult feelings and to release emotions which might otherwise remain bottled up. More specifically, written exposure therapy is being trialled as a treatment for PTSD, depression, anxiety, and burnout symptoms in nursing (Li et al, 2025). In this evidence-based behavioural psychotherapy, individuals are caused to bring to mind the traumatic experience and write in detail the thoughts and emotions they had at the time, reliving the distress, processing it and taking meaning from it, so that it no longer triggers such a negative response.

Oliver Sacks, the so-called 'storyteller neurologist', experienced a healing beyond the physical as he wrote his bestseller, retelling the story of his complex leg injury following a mountaineering accident (Sacks, 1991). In 'A Leg to Stand On', Sacks writes about his psychogenic leg paralysis, which rendered his leg useless, and entirely alien to him - a "foreign inconceivable thing". As he writes on the physical injury, Sacks comes to realise that "what was disconnected was not merely nerve and muscle....the spirit was ruptured, precisely as the body". He concludes that "it was not just a lesion in a muscle, but a lesion in me". And, likening his previously healthy body to a sturdy ship with himself as captain, he senses a kind of 'vanishing' of that self and a loss of both body image and body ego.

With the heart being sometimes seen as the very 'seat of self', might cardiac patients, more than most, sense a dislocation similar to Sacks and enter the dark night of the soul, which he so eloquently describes? Is it time to let our patients exhale and give their stories voice, to guide our clinical decision making and inspire care which heals beyond the body? Narrative medicine is an emerging speciality in which clinical practice is fortified by stories. It can help patients find meaning in illness, and "draw new maps and find new destinations" in a life disrupted by disease (Frank, 2013:53).

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Links

[1] <https://www.magonlinelibrary.com/doi/abs/10.12968/bjca.2026.0044>