

## VIEWPOINT

### VOICES IN CARDIOLOGY

# “Science and Charity”

## Picasso’s Lessons for Medical Practice

Eduardo Vilela, MD, PhD,<sup>a</sup> Ricardo Fontes-Carvalho, MD, PhD<sup>a,b</sup>



Throughout the ages, medicine played a central role across several civilizations, while presenting an intricate overlap with diverse aspects of human life.<sup>1,2</sup> From the sacred healing rituals of ancient Egypt and the Greco-Roman period, to the deep religious links in Medieval Europe, but

also reflecting on the political roles played by physicians spanning different eras, these dynamic interconnections helped to shape medical practice but have also influenced different cultures and societies.<sup>3-5</sup>

Medicine has continuously evolved in parallel to developments from a wide range of areas such as biology, chemistry, and engineering, but its prominent place at the intersection between natural, technical, and social sciences has been an ever-present factor.<sup>6,7</sup> Moreover, the unique nature of medicine encompassing both its complex and specific technical aspects but also the need for a highly personalized approach to the individual patient, built on a strong empathic rapport influenced greatly by sociocultural contexts, spans the gap between its dimensions. Since Virchow’s classical description of the relationship between medicine and social science in the 19th century, a growing interest in social determinants of health has taken center stage on contemporary health policies.<sup>8,9</sup> In this regard, these have progressively impacted current concepts regarding many pathologies, being identified as relevant factors across the cardiovascular continuum while connecting with other major themes such as health accessibility and equity.<sup>9</sup> Given this background, it is of interest to reflect on past paradigms concerning these intertwined facets, and their potential impact on the patient-physician relationship and beyond.

This concept is exquisitely illustrated in the masterpiece painting “Science and Charity” by the Spanish-born master Pablo Picasso (Figure 1). This work from the late 19th century was one of the first paintings made by the young Picasso and had significant success in several exhibitions, such as those in Madrid and Malaga in 1897 (garnering an honorable mention and gold prize, respectively).

Picasso has a worldwide recognition for the diversity of styles along his long and prolific career, as

**FIGURE 1** Pablo Picasso: Science and Charity: Picasso Museum, Spain, 1897



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From the <sup>a</sup>Cardiology Department, Unidade Local de Saúde de Gaia e Espinho, Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal; and the <sup>b</sup>UnIC@RISE, Department of Surgery and Physiology, Faculty of Medicine of the University of Porto, Porto, Portugal.

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well as for his ground-breaking compositions transcending genres. Although the style of this painting may not be immediately recognized as a “typical” Picasso, this fabulous painting conveys several aspects of medical practice that are worthy of consideration.<sup>10-14</sup>

First, the thematic of disease may be viewed as personally close to Picasso, who would revisit this at different time points along his journey as an artist.<sup>10,11</sup> At an early age, as a teenager, Picasso was confronted with the death of his younger sister Concepción (Conchita) from diphtheria (2 years before the unveiling of this work), an aspect of his life that had a strong influence in his early paintings.<sup>10-12</sup> Furthermore, Picasso’s career was also strongly influenced by medicine because it was his paternal uncle, a well-known physician at that time, who sponsored his studies in Madrid at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando.<sup>10,15</sup>

In this painting, a sick woman can be seen lying while being assessed by a physician on one side while being comforted by a nun holding a child on the opposite (Figure 1). The substantially diseased demeanor of the patient may convey the suffering brought on by her clinical condition, and the behavior of both physician and nun (symbolizing “Science” and “Charity”) allude to sociocultural frameworks of the time.<sup>10,11,16</sup> In the foreground, the physician (modeled after Picasso’s father), sitting on a chair, is seen taking the patient’s pulse. It is noteworthy that his expression is one of authority and stern concentration, while his gaze is focused away from the patient. Skillfully, the artist portrays the invisible and yet clearly defined gap between these figures, far greater than the distance from the patient’s bed to the physician’s chair.<sup>10,17</sup> On the opposite side, a nun holding a child (in keeping with a traditional view of “Charity”) stares intently at the patient, comforting her with her posture as well as offering a cup with her right hand.<sup>10,11,16,17</sup> These contrasting portrayals of different dimensions of medical practice echo with the views at the time, in which a distant and paternalistic interpretation of the patient-physician relationship prevailed.<sup>10,18</sup> Interestingly, these medical topics were also being explored by other famous paintings of this period, such as “The Mother’s Visit to the Hospital” by Enrique Paternina (often cited as an inspiration to this work) and also the latter landmark of social realism “Hospital Room During the Visit of the Chief of Staff” by the also Spanish-born painter Luis Jimenéz Aranda.<sup>11,18</sup> These suggest the

relevance of these topics, as well as the societal debate around them.

Although “Science and Charity” has attracted both admiration and study, some insights provided by novel technologies and shifting sociocultural views reinforce its enduring quality.<sup>10,12-14</sup> The proficient use of light and color, as well as the attention to detail in both main figures and their surroundings, attest to the level of work put forth in its conception.<sup>12,13,16</sup> Interestingly, more recent analysis based on techniques such as spectrophotometry and radiography unveiled minute details, further expanding our understanding of this piece.<sup>12,13</sup> Indeed, beyond the sketches developed along its creative process, data also describe the occurrence of alterations to original configurations within this work.<sup>12,13</sup> These resonate with the presence of prior depictions later displaced and covered by a final design, a phenomenon referred to as a *pentimento*, which may be observed in other works by Picasso but also by artists from different time periods, reinforcing the complexity and intense attention to detail in this composition.<sup>12,13,19,20</sup> Although creative liberties and figurative propositions should be acknowledged, Picasso’s both touching and powerful painting provides an elegant view on some of the perceptions and contradictions concerning the theme under discussion, at the time of its production.<sup>10,11,17</sup>

Although more than a century has passed, “Science and Charity” can still provide relevant reflections concerning medical practice, its interconnection to sociocultural standards, and some of its present and future challenges. Although medicine has experienced a constant progression, the next decades could possibly bring even more profound transformations. Factors such as the ubiquitous presence of information technologies, the permanent connectivity provided by social media, the advent of artificial intelligence in medicine, and big data analysis have ushered in a new dawn filled with possibilities and the potential to tackle some of the challenges faced by medicine, and society in general.<sup>21-23</sup> Nonetheless, there is also the risk of introducing disruption in the patient-physician relationship but also in several sociocultural interactions and paradigms.<sup>21,23,24</sup>

Although unrelenting changes are poised to remain a constant in both medicine and society, reflecting on the advances made since Picasso’s work should inspire us as we strive to optimize the timeless patient-physician relationship and the delicate equilibrium of medical practice, where qualities of both

science and charity rise above to become truly a profoundly humanistic artform.

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**ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:** Dr Ricardo Fontes-Carvalho, Department of Surgery and Physiology, Faculty of Medicine of the University of Porto, Alameda Prof. Hernâni Monteiro, 4200-319 Porto, Portugal. E-mail: [fontes.carvalho@gmail.com](mailto:fontes.carvalho@gmail.com).

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