

# Art of Storytelling: The Human Experience of Being a Psychiatrist

An SCPS-Produced Documentary will premiere at the American Psychiatric Association's Annual Meeting May 18<sup>th</sup> in Atlanta

By Michelle Furuta, MD

The story of who psychiatrists are today, what they do, and what they value has been told by almost everyone but them. Psychiatrists are notoriously private; cautious about revealing personal information, and noticeably absent in the media.

What has been the consequence of this? If you don't tell your story, someone else will tell it for you. A simple Google search of "Psychiatry Documentary" produces a horrific display of anti-psychiatry propaganda and ignorant distortions of the field intended to elicit fear - "Psychiatry: An Industry of Death", and "The Age of Fear: Psychiatry's Reign of Terror" are a few examples. We all know where these productions have come from, but what has the response been, and has it been enough? How did this happen to a well-educated group that is not socioeconomically disenfranchised and is certainly not going around terrorizing or killing people? The repercussions have been serious. Mental illness is the number one cause of disability worldwide, however many patients still fear coming to see a psychiatrist – that they will be overmedicated, not listened to, not understood, not cared for, or worse - maybe the psychiatrist will see how "crazy" they are and lock them up. The stereotype of being "crazy" is equated with being dangerous, weird, scary, and ostracized - and in some ways - so is being a psychiatrist.

While media distortions of psychiatrists are not the only source of stigma, the inattention to creating an authentic professional narrative has contributed to gross stereotypes of both psychiatrists and patients that continue to reinforce stigma in mental health. But it isn't just what other people think of psychiatrists and patients that has been impacted. Through the making and watching of this film I had a startling realization - something I had never even considered prior. The stereotypes of Psychiatrists created by others was having a massive impact on the way I saw *myself*, my profession, and the ways in which I continued to unintentionally *reinforce* these stereotypes, all the while thinking – yeah, maybe some of that really is true, but *I am the exception*.

Psychiatrists are private people. The guardians of people's truths, they work alone in private rooms, quietly attending to places in the human psyche that very few have the skill, ability, or willingness to go. Not only do psychiatrists hold the truths of our patients, but that of our profession. We are the receivers and tellers of stories, and the *only* accurate source of our own story.

**Art of Storytelling: The Human Experience of Being a Psychiatrist** is a documentary that follows six psychiatrists as they take an oral history from twelve other psychiatrists. Interviews were built around the same 12 questions with one simple focus - what is the human experience of being a Psychiatrist? A concept conceived by the Art of Psychiatric Medicine Committee, we set out to find a better understanding of our profession through the lens of the individual – where have we come from? Where are we going? How are we perceived?

How do we perceive ourselves? The interviewees encompass a group spanning 60 years in age and are diverse in gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and type of practice. The individual interviews illustrate inter-generational differences and similarities within our field - but ultimately coalesces to create a cohesive narrative of who Psychiatrists are in Southern California right now.

What is felt through these stories is deeply touching and authentic. Some of the themes we see emerge are: a strong value of connection, incredible personal resilience, a commitment to service, radical compassion for others, an openness and embrace of differences, and a deep love for people and the work they do. It changes the old narratives and debunks the stereotypes. It challenges non-psychiatrists to rethink their views of Psychiatrists and Psychiatry, but it also challenges Psychiatrists to consider their own authentic narratives - to update and courageously tell their own stories. I believe it will change the way other people see Psychiatrists, but even if it doesn't, it has changed the way I see myself. Doing the work of a Psychiatrist is something I have always loved, but it is now a professional identity that I hold in tremendously high regard, and am honored to share. This is a group of people I am proud to be a part of, and have found, to my surprise, that I am far more similar than different to them all. It has been an incredible discovery, and a wonderful relief.

**Art Of Storytelling: The Human Experience of Being a Psychiatrist** will premiere at the American Psychiatric Association's Annual Meeting this May in Atlanta, GA. (**Event 3909, Media Workshop, Wednesday, 5/18 9a.m.-noon, Georgia World Congress Center - Building B - Level 4, Room B402**) The film was a group project of the Art of Psychiatric Medicine Committee – Michelle Furuta, MD (Director and Committee Chair), Linda Do, DO, Arsalan Malik, MD, Elizabeth McGuire, MD, Steve Soldingier, MD, and Devin Stroman, MD. Cast members/Interviewees: Michael Gales, MD, Jaime Garcia, MD, Haig Goenjian, MD, Charles Grob, MD, Ijeoma Ijeaku, MD, Martha Kirkpatrick, MD, Maria Lymberis, MD, Joseph Natterson, MD, Kristen Ochoa, MD, Robert Ross, MD, Mary Ann Schaepper, MD, and Kimberly Shapiro, MD. It was produced by Mindi Thelen for the Southern California Psychiatric Society and edited by Tim Thelen.

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