

#dotMED16. Life at the Nexus

Mohammed Hamza*

The fourth iteration of the dotMED conference took place in Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre on February 12th this year, and not unlike previous years, was a breath of fresh air, rekindling that ardent love for medicine we used to feel - that we need to feel again.



*Dr. Stephen Bergman, aka Samuel Shem, author of the acclaimed "House of God," speaking at dotMed 2016.
Photo: Mohammed Hamza*

Let's go back to the beginning - an apt place to start - of the dotMED story. On the island of Ireland, somewhere west of the mighty Shannon, a rheumatologist and a medical journalist were wrestling with their ennui at the state in which they found their beloved profession. The outlook was bleak, and the stale science and raw data of the typical medical conference did nothing to stoke the fire.

But rather than falling to despair, Dr. Ronan Kavanagh (@RonanTKavanagh) and Dr. Muiris Houston (@muirishouston) put their heads together and the unique annual experience we've come to love was born.

dotMED's mission is to expose healthcare professionals to ideas that take place at the interface of medicine, technology and the humanities. In doing so we intend to inspire and reinvigorate them, and reawaken in them a sense of fun and curiosity about medicine.

Four years on, with this ethos at its heart, dotMED and all the illustrious speakers that have graced its stage, have led all of us fortunate enough to have experienced it from the insular argot of our specialties to the nexus of modern life.

Sticking with beginnings for the moment, I'll briefly mention my introduction to this conference. I was chosen to be one of the medical student scholars for the dotMED14 conference, which took place on December 5, 2014. Being a broke final med, there weren't many opportunities to attend

an international conference for free available to me, let alone one that spoke so strongly to the tech nerd and erstwhile artist in me. I leapt at the opportunity, and did not hesitate to do so again when the chance arose to be involved in this year's event with Kavanagh, Houston, et al.

Needless to say, dotMED14 blew my mind. Watching the talks from the year before did nothing to prepare me. Scintillating videos of the talks - from architect Ed Gavagan, blogger and speaker Dr. Bryan Vartabedian, blogger, physician and poet Dr. Jordan Grumet, among many others - only primed me for the jaw-dropping experience of being at the event live.

Seriously, I had to make a conscious effort to keep my mouth closed throughout the day.

We were taken on a whirlwind journey, starting with some very poignant and personal talks from Marie Ennis O'Connor and Dr. Louise Aronson about their own healthcare experiences, to an eye-opening look at NYU School of Medicine's forward thinking from Dr. Marc Triola. Poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch shared his unique ruminations on life and death, and we heard from Irish award-winning author, Kevin Barry, on "The Skin of Anxiety" (a great read, an even better listen, video on www.dotmedconference.ie).

And of course there was Dr. Zubin Damania, aka ZDoggMD, who almost brought the house down with his exploration of the culture of healthcare through anecdotes, comedy, and music.



*Dr. Zubin Damania, aka "ZDOGG MD," medic, comic, and founder of Turntable Health, speaking at dotMed 2014.
Photo: Mohammed Hamza*

Now if that's not a platter that'd whet your appetite... Well, let's just say there were many hungry mouths to feed, and this year's buffet sold out months in advance.

As the day finally arrived, Ronan Kavanagh took the podium to palpable anticipation, and welcomed the speakers, delegates, and 12 medical student scholars. The first speaker soon followed.

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Now if you think that things like big data sets or computational epigenomics wouldn't interest you, you simply haven't heard Dr. John Grealley (@EpgntxEinstein) speak. Professor of Genetics, Pediatrics and Medicine at the Einstein College of Medicine, as well as the founding director of the Einstein Center for Epigenomics, Dr. Grealley has taken a keen interest in making "big data" accessible to people lacking in computer programming skills. In his talk, "Learning from Artists in the Digital Age," he illustrated humanity's affinity for visual representation throughout history, and his pioneering work trying to continue this evolution by bringing together artists, geneticists, and data visualisation experts to help solve the problem of genomic data interpretation.

Did you know there are more smartphones in the world right now than toilets? No? Well, neither did I until Dr. Joel Topf (@kidney_boy) delivered his tour de force on "Digital Mentorship: Fortifying your Social Media Diet." A clinical nephrologist whose passion lies in medical education, Dr. Topf took us through the evolution and future of medical texts in particular and of education at large. He also highlighted the potential inherent in blogs and social media through his own blog "Precious Bodily Fluids," the twitter-based journal club he co-founded "NephJC," "DreamRCT" which he described as "shark tank, but for science," and "NephMadness," for which Dr. Topf's own description may not inform, but definitely intrigues: "A totally preposterous, social media-medical education-gamification-Franken Creature that rocks the nephrology social media sphere every March."

Dr. Leticia Ruiz Rivera (@Letiruizr), a palliative care physician from Granada, Spain, presented her exhibition next. "Limits" examines the dehumanizing effect of criminally long on-call hours that get in the way of socializing. The before- and after- images of junior doctors on a 24-hour shift did not fail to resonate with anyone who had experienced this during their training.

After a short coffee break during which everyone could appreciate Dr. Ruiz Rivera's work, there was a "dragon's den" style pitching competition. PMD Respiratory were the eventual winners with their innovative device to accurately measure respiratory rate, a vital sign highly valued but oft neglected in patient monitoring. The other entries this year were all very worthy, with some very intelligent products, such as Cove from Humane Engineering, which reimagines psychotherapy and grief counseling in an app; Simplicity MDT from NSilico, a platform designed to facilitate discussion of patients in a multidisciplinary team; and the Beats Medical app, targeted at people living with Parkinson's disease, acting as a symptom tracker and therapeutic tool with its metronome or "march beats" function.

Shortly after this, Muiris Houston sat down with Panti Bliss (@PantiBliss), the "accidental activist" and "gender discombobulist" who became a key figure in the campaign for marriage equality in Ireland. He appeared in the guise of Rory O'Neill, and shared with Muiris and the captivated audience an evolving patient experience going back 20 years to when he was first diagnosed with HIV, which in the 90s was a grim fate indeed. Fast forward to today, and Rory can recognize the great progress that has made HIV incidental to his life, but also the ever-present cultural obstacles to detection and

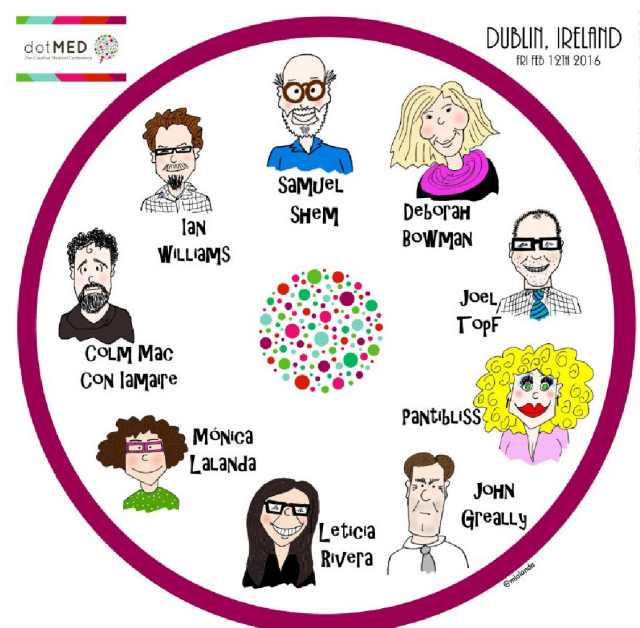
treatment: "I want people not to fear HIV; otherwise they won't get tested."

Lunch was followed by the first item of the afternoon session, a mesmerising performance by Colm Mac Con Iomaire (@cmacconiomaire), a great Irish musician and founding member of the celebrated band, The Frames. Words, I'm afraid, would not do it justice. Much like with Sam Jackson's performance from dotMED14, Colm's instrumental offering was anything but incongruous, and seemed to not only fit, but lend the day another dimension.

Professor Deborah Bowman (@deborahbowman), Professor of Bioethics, Clinical Ethics, and Medical Law and Dean of Students at St. George's, University of London followed with her talk on "Staging Medicine: Theatrical Perspectives on Health." She brought us on a tour of the links between medicine and theatre, and what we as doctors can learn from actors about that private, therapeutic moment shared with the patient. She also touched on dealing with burnout and our often "obstructed" perspectives in our day-to-day lives.

"Graphic Medicine and the Bad Doctor" was the next talk, delivered by Dr. Ian Williams (@TheBadDr), a physician (not an altogether bad one), comics artist, and writer based in Brighton. He published the critically acclaimed graphic novel, "The Bad Doctor," last year, and spoke to us about the interface between comics and the discourse of healthcare and his place in it as artist and founder of the Graphic Medicine website. He also shared the tragi-comedic inverse correlation graph of his increasing fulfillment as an artist and his decreasing income.

In the panel discussion with Ronan that followed, Ian, Deborah, and Leticia were joined by the other half of the Spanish delegation, Dr. Monica Lalanda (@mlalanda), an emergency medicine specialist trained in cartoon drawing at the London Art College who, for the second year running, has immortalized each of the speaker's talks in a unique graphic recording.



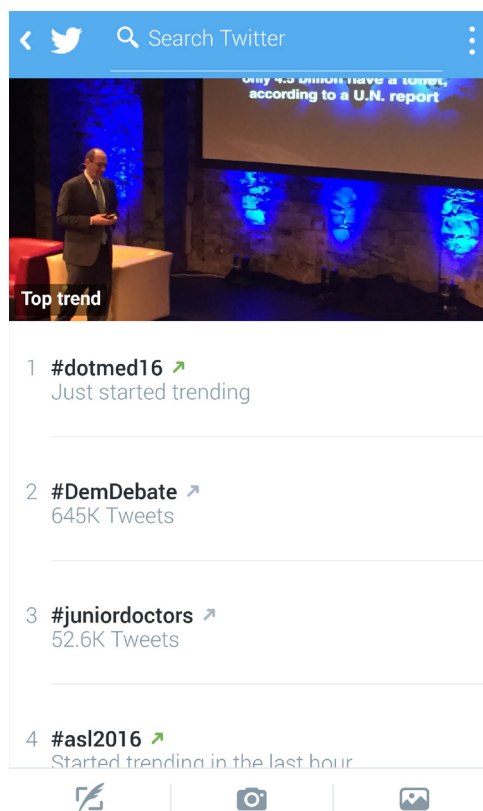
The dotMed 2016 speakers. Illustrations by Monica Lalanda

Finally, to much anticipation, Dr. Stephen Bergman (aka Samuel Shem) gave his stirring talk on “Staying Human in Medicine in a World on Fire.” The author of “House of God,” an iconic book that has sold over 3 million copies worldwide and inspired/embittered generations of doctors, ambled over to the podium and began connecting with the audience. At first, with humour, a great way to initiate connection, as he had learned from his writing. He regaled the audience with tales of his prior visits to Dublin, on an obstetrics rotation, when nights of heavy drinking had been rounded off with performing a few deliveries. As Dr. Bergman delved deeper into the crux of his talk, “the danger of isolation and the healing power of good connection,” the laughs receded and brows furrowed as everyone was drawn into a deep contemplation of the hierarchical structures that enable isolation. Connection is a skill, however, one that makes us better doctors, and preserves our humanity in the crucible of our profession.

And what better way could we round off a conference on the interconnected nature of medicine, technology, and the humanities, a conference that emphasizes connection very highly. In the week before and week after the conference, 545 unique users had used the hashtag #dotMED16, with a total of 2,920 tweets posted in that period with the same hashtag; 2,415 of those tweets included a mention of another user, 1,658 were retweets and 206 were replies. Of those tweets, 2,187 (75%) were posted on the day itself, which had #dotMED16 topping the trending charts for a while that day in Ireland.

The dotMED story has been a riveting one to date. I’ve had the immeasurable fortune to be able to be involved this year, to see it from the inside as conference intern. Dr. Ronan

Kavanagh and Dr. Muiris Houston have created a unique experience, one that’ll leave an indelible mark on anyone in presence; one that I’d be a fool to miss next year.



Dr. Joel Topf speaking at dotMed 2016, profiled as the top Twitter trend in Ireland on the day of the conference.

