

## Requiem for the humanities

Mary Jane, the medical student on our service, writes good medical histories and always knows the results of the latest laboratory tests. She is pleasant, polite, and works hard; but she has read little outside medicine. She has never heard of Henry James; has no idea who Jane Austen was; has never read Hemingway. She would think that Julius Caesar makes salads or delivers babies, and that Deuteronomy is one of his more complicated obstetric operations. Of the world's capitals she can name only London, Paris, and (surprise!) Brasilia. She has never been to a symphony concert; has never set foot in a museum; and she does not even watch television.

She says that in college she took only science courses--mainly biology, chemistry, statistics, and mathematics. She took a year of English, a little Spanish, and a course on the history of the cinema, but from then on it was science all the way. She is by no means atypical; for despite much talk about educated graduates learning "what is worth knowing and what is important in our heritage," as a former health minister once put it, the present system still tends to produce medical technocrats. Some universities indeed have offered the occasional course in "behavioral sciences" or a rare combined liberal arts-medicine course. But none of this would have fooled Mary Jane into believing that she would have got into medical school had she not taken mainly science courses in college.

Indeed, the most notable recent "liberalization" in medical school has been to allow more time for esoteric electives and less for medical and surgical clerkships, resulting in interns who do not know how to palpate the spleen or test the urine, let alone examine the neurological system. Which led a thoughtful dean of a university to suggest some time ago that we should overcome the urge to tamper with the medical curriculum and instead concentrate our efforts on improving education during the years before entry into medical school, if indeed we wish to produce well educated doctors "imbued with a commitment to lifelong learning and an appreciation of their role in society."

Yet even this may no longer be necessary, with managed competition and health alliances soon to take over. Why overload the poor doctors with useless stuff and not limit their education to learning algorithms for diagnosing hemoptysis and treating diarrhea? For there is nothing wrong if you think that the Philistines are the head hunters on Mindanao, or if you plain just don't know who on earth they were--as long as you're not bothered by the thought that you might be one of them. But now science has come to the rescue after all, and the good news, according to researchers from the University of California, is that listening to Mozart for 10 minutes will boost the brain power of college students by enhancing certain patterns of neuronal activity. Why not then package a few bits (or should I say bytes?) of liberal education on a couple of compact discs? With Figaro expounding on military history, Leporello on geography, and Don Giovanni on politically correct sexual behavior, even Mary Jane should be able to hold her own at the next provider network cocktail party.