

HEALTH

Healing power of words

UI doctors find relief from pressures of medicine through writing group

By Erika Binegar

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IOWA CITY — Thirteen years after Brian Olshansky's father died, he purged some of his negative feelings about the medical profession through a short story.

Olshansky's father had suffered a brain injury when he fell at work and died several weeks later in the hospital.

In a two-page story, Olshansky wrote of having no chance to share final words with his father, and of his

struggle to see doctors treat his dad like a faceless patient.

This experience left an imprint on Olshansky's view of his profession. About seven years later, Olshansky, a professor of internal medicine in the



Brian Olshansky
Internal Medicine
Writers' Group member

University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine, continues to write.

"It's been a tremendous outlet," the 55-year-old said. "It's a way to connect with emotions and other people; you kind of understand certain things better."

Olshansky — along with a group of other faculty, fellows, residents and emeritus faculty in the UI Department of Internal Medicine — finds cathartic relief from the pressures of the medical field via the Internal Medicine Writers' Group.

Margaret LeMay-Lewis, a 2001 graduate of the Iowa

Writers' Workshop, and Bill Radl, a program assistant with UI internal medicine administration, organized the group about two years ago.

It's a forum for members to participate in workshop writing that ranges from scientific papers to creative non-fiction.

For Arti Barnes, a UI hospital resident, the writing group was exactly what she was hoping to find in Iowa.

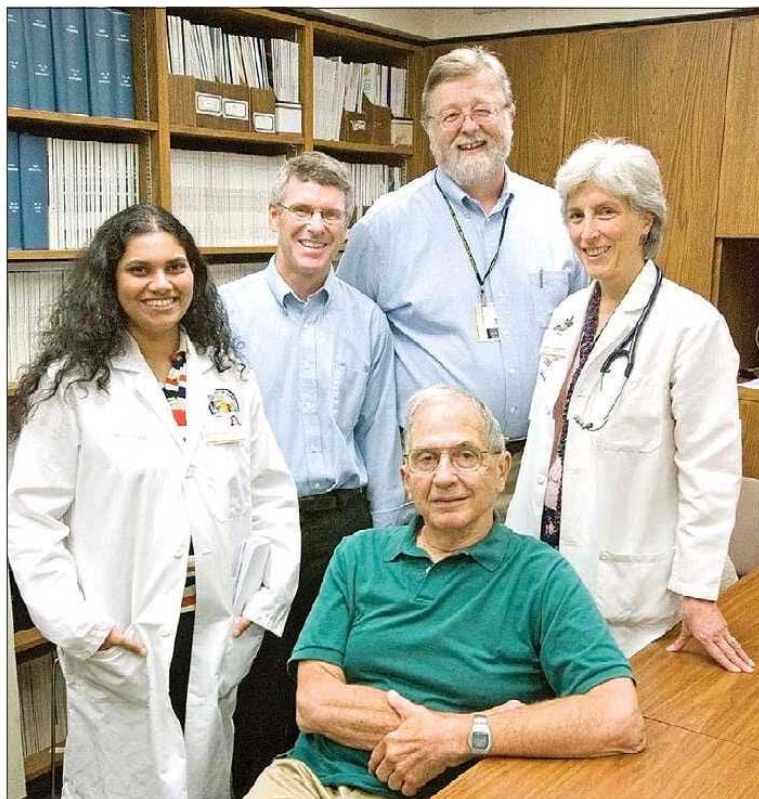
"It's something to look forward to," she said of the meetings. "It's a way to be in the hospital and not think about medicine."

Barnes, of Mumbai, India, said she has written short stories and poetry since grade school.

Now, she writes to cope with the pressures of her job.

One piece, for example, depicts her interaction with a 19-year-old patient with catatonic schizophrenia.

"It all stems from some emotion that was triggered at some point," she said,



Jim Slosiarek/The Gazette

Arti Barnes (clockwise, from left), Bruce Brown, Bill Radl, Loreen Herwaldt and Jim Christensen are members of a writing group at University Hospitals in Iowa City that began two years ago.

adding, "Everyone's a character."

Barnes, who has little time to write as much as she'd like, said writing helps her detach from the medical routine.

The same is true for Loreen Herwaldt, a professor of internal medicine and infectious diseases who regularly contributes to the group.

"Writing helps you step back and reflect about things you experience," she said.

Herwaldt — who became interested in creative writing after a class at the Iowa Summer Writing Festival — likes to compose creative non-fiction and personal essays.

Her pieces range in subject from patients to every-

day experiences, but her best work is created through playfulness, she said.

"If my mind is free, language is more graceful," said Herwaldt, 56. "That, to me, is a successful writing experience; if I'm able to let go and have fun with it."

Jim Christensen, 76, said he focuses more on whether

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Writing/'A catharsis' for UI doctors

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the poems he submits for group discussion communicate a deeper meaning.

The UI emeritus professor of gastroenterology, who retired in 1998, said he has completed 250 poems — about the number of scientific papers he wrote as a doctor.

Christensen, of North Liberty, said he creates those poems out of life experiences, rather than thin air.

“Everybody benefits from having creative outlets,” he said. “It’s a matter of talking about your life.”

That is also true for Bruce

Brown, a UI associate professor emeritus of radiology who retired in July. Brown, 63, takes characters he’s met, sometimes in the hospital, and puts them into fictional stories or memoirs. One of his recent pieces depicts a 5-year-old girl in heaven.

“Writing is sort of a catharsis,” he said. “It’s a way of working through the stresses that occur with patient care.”

The group’s next meeting is Sept. 27.

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