

PROFILE



Listen to the Stories

Medical school was just the beginning of Dr. Sharon Hull's education.

One day, eight-year-old Sharon Hull, who lived in a small southern Illinois town, saw a newspaper article about the opening of a new medical school in southern Illinois, and that story marked the beginning of a lifelong journey. "I'm going to go there someday," she declared to her grandmother, though at the time — and for many years following — Sharon had no interest in becoming a doctor.

But as she grew up, Sharon was drawn to medicine. And true to her word, Sharon Hull would graduate from SIU School of Medicine 17 years later, specializing in family practice.

Dr. Hull has been called "the quintessential SIU School of Medicine student," a "risk-taker" and a fan of new experiences. She admits that she is all of these things, but most of all, she is a listener.

"There's a story in everything," she says. "I knew medicine was a chance to hear people's stories. Family medicine in particular really values a person's stories."

But that's just the beginning of the story of Sharon Hull, M.D., assistant professor of family and community medicine and assistant dean of student affairs at the School of Medicine's Carbondale campus, which is where medical students begin their four years of training. As a teacher

and dean of students, Dr. Hull still listens to people's stories and uses them as a springboard for professional and personal growth. "I'm interested in taking care of the whole person in the context of their lives — family, jobs, spirituality — whatever is important to them."

What is becoming important to a lot of people is complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), with 87 million Americans participating in some kind of CAM therapy each year.

Dr. Hull's interest in CAM began when she was chief of women's health at the Student Health Program Clinic at SIU Carbondale, where she found opportunities to expand her ideas about medicine.

"I was treating students from 90 different countries: European, Chinese and Japanese students, and many brought herbal therapies with them." With labels often written in foreign languages, Dr. Hull used her university resources to discover a new world of holistic healing. "The more I was willing to listen, the more people were willing to tell me their stories about CAM." She began listening to patients, faculty and students and reading the range of printed resources that was becoming available. Her epiphany: Doctors can't just learn about the physical body; they also must address patients' emotional and spiritual needs, which can't always be treated with Western medicines. As a result, a new chapter opened in her life.

"My interest stems from honoring the patient, and if the patient has questions about CAM, we as physicians need to know about it," she says, speaking with ease and friendly confidence. These may be alternative ideas to some, but for this physician, it's like speaking about an old friend.

Not only did Dr. Hull want to know about CAM therapies, she wanted to create her own stories through experience. She praises acupuncture and massage therapy as good stress reducers. Once, before a medical procedure, Dr. Hull persuaded a massage therapist to treat her in the hospital, “which helped my anxiety about having the procedure done.”

Following extensive knee surgery, Dr. Hull worked with her orthopaedist to develop her own healing regimen that included homeopathic remedies to reduce bruising and swelling.

Within 10 days, Dr. Hull could walk on the recuperating knee. “I’m a risk-taker. I look for experiences just for the sake of saying I’ve done them.”

Call her a careful risk-taker — one who educates herself on both sides of an issue. Dr. Hull has done extensive research on the limitations of CAM therapies such as herbal remedies, and she counts cynics as the best source of information. “I’m willing to agree with the skeptics that some of it is snake oil. But our job as physicians is to sort through evidence and determine what is dangerous and what has the potential to help.”

But why tackle such a broad and controversial topic like CAM? “Most of us become physicians because at some point we were awestruck at what the human body can do. I believe that there is still much to be awed by in the field of medicine, things that we don’t understand,” says Dr. Hull, who adds that if you dismiss new ideas, “you’ve lost your chance to be awed.”

Eager to be awed, Dr. Hull is not afraid to pursue controversial issues. She was active with HIV patients before much was known about the disease. “I saw so much fear on the part of so many people,” she says. That philosophy directly relates to Dr. Hull’s goals with CAM: to show physicians that they can be a part of

their patients’ interest in CAM, even though they may not have all the answers.

As she searches for answers to CAM questions, Dr. Hull is grateful for the continuing support she receives from the faculty and staff at SIU. She describes them as warm and caring people, a fact she discovered on her very first visit to the medical school as an applicant.

“

*I learned that
if you listen to the
story, you can
be a part of
patients’ healing
whether or not
you have a cure.*

”

On her way to her first interview, she lost her way on the Carbondale campus and arrived 10 minutes late for the meeting. Sharon arrived in a state of panic, and the medical student who would interview her was very reassuring, she remembers. “Don’t sweat it,” he told me. “We have all the time in the world.” I knew then that I would be treated like a real person and not get lost in the crowd. SIU felt like the right place to be.”

More than a decade later, SIU is still

the right place for Dr. Hull, who has tried to give her students as much support as she herself received as a student. This includes — you guessed it — listening to them and their concerns about complementary medicine. “Students are happy just to know that it’s OK to talk about it,” she says.

Considering CAM will make students better physicians, says Dr. Hull, and it will give them a chance to combine their scientific and technical knowledge with the feelings and emotions of their patients, much like a musician must combine the technical details of music with the spirit and emotion of each composition.

Music happens to be another chapter in the life of Dr. Hull. She plays the piano, guitar and saxophone. In addition, she is a published poet, an avid reader and an accomplished chef. And she remains very close to her parents, brother and sister, who all live in southern Illinois.

Though Dr. Hull hasn’t moved very far from her hometown of Harrisburg, Illinois, she has moved far ahead in seeking pathways to better medicine. “I’m pushing the envelope in ways that I think will lead to growth of the medical profession, the SIU institution and my own personal growth.”

With such a comfortable lifestyle in southern Illinois, Dr. Hull’s desires to push the envelope may be a little surprising to some. But beneath her relaxed demeanor lies a passion to view the world differently.

“You don’t get into medical school without following the rules. But to break that pattern and say there’s a different way to look at things has really stretched my own skills and my own view of the world.”

With complementary medicine perhaps adding more footnotes to traditional medicine, you can be sure there are many more chapters yet to be written in the story of Dr.

Sharon Hull. ■