

Distinguished Alumnus Focuses on Empathy in Health Care

LAST LYCEUM: David Carsten, Who Will Be Honored by Centralia College, Explains Why Empathy is Important to Health Care Field

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David Carsten said he has had many “empathy challenges.”

Working as a traveling anesthesiologist, the Centralia College graduate has seen people at their worst.

Whether it was a 62-year-old woman battling diabetes and in the process of getting her legs amputated, or a 2-year-old boy who fell out of a second-story window and couldn't be saved, Carsten said it is important to understand what individuals are going through.

He was the speaker at Wednesday's Lyceum presentation at Centralia College.

Carsten, who was selected as Centralia College's Distinguished Alumnus of the year, said a persistent challenge in the medical field is the lack of empathy.

In literary works dating as far back as 1895, many scholars have said that professionals in the field should disassociate from a patient's feelings.

That mindset has slowly been changing. Carsten said some professionals are starting to understand the importance of the virtue, which recently led to changes of the Medical College Admission Test, more commonly known as the MCAT.

“This is not theoretical anymore,” he said, adding that half the questions on the test now focused on psychology and sociology.

The shift has been gradual, but Carsten said it is key to practice both mindfulness and empathy to help avoid burnout in the medical field and to better treat patients.

“Part of this question is what does a patient really want? They want someone to work with them, not on them,” he said.

He pinpointed burnout to sympathy, an individual process that focuses on the self and stirs emotions instead of empathy, the ability to understand someone else and their situation.

Carsten explained the function of mirror neurons in the brain that help with empathy, something he said is a vital piece in any successful relationship.

“It's important to distinguish between sympathy and empathy and realize how important empathy is in all human reactions,” he said. “I use medicine as an example because they are being forced to acknowledge this as one of the most important types of things in any relationship, to have empathy.”

As the owner of a dental practice called Pacific Dental Anesthesia in Vancouver, Washington, Carsten also travels to a variety of health care facilities to teach on the topic.

“Once we understand how our brains work, how our psychology works, how we are naturally put together, you don't have to get burned out for a compassionate presence,” he said. “Why would it make you feel bad to relieve some person's suffering?”

Carsten, who graduated from Centralia College in 1977, and later pursued a degree in biochemistry, will be recognized by the Centralia College Foundation at an invite-only award luncheon on June 12 for the success he has experienced throughout his career.