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Medicine, Music, and the Human Spirit

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Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a profound honour to speak to you in this remarkable place — the Josephinum — a building that itself tells a story about what medicine truly is. Built as one of the first modern medical academies of Europe and now home to the Medical History Museum of the University of Vienna, it stands as a monument to the union of science, craftsmanship, beauty, and deep respect for the human person.

From its very architecture to its exquisite anatomical wax models, the Josephinum reminds us that medicine has never been only a technical enterprise. It has always been a dialogue between precision and creativity, between observation and imagination, between knowledge and empathy. Long before the era of digital imaging and artificial intelligence, physicians here learned through objects that were at once scientific tools and works of art. This setting powerfully reflects the enduring truth that medicine is both a science and an art.

Today, as we gather for this Congress, it is fitting to reflect on the relationship between medicine and culture — and in particular, on the role of physicians as artists, and of the arts as a vital dimension of healing and humanism.

Throughout history, physicians have been writers, painters, sculptors, and musicians. From Chekhov to Keats, from Borodin to Schweitzer, the medical profession has produced individuals who sought not only to understand the body, but also to interpret the human condition through creative expression. This is not a coincidence. The practice of medicine, at its core, requires the same qualities that define great art: attentive listening, emotional intelligence, discipline, sensitivity to nuance, and the capacity to respond to suffering with both skill and compassion.

Africa, too, offers luminous examples of physicians whose healing has extended beyond the clinic into the realms of art and culture. One thinks of Dr Abraham Verghese, born in Ethiopia, whose novels and memoirs have carried the lived texture of African hospitals, families, and ethical dilemmas to a global readership, reminding us that medicine is, at its

core, a narrative art. Or of contemporary East African physician-musicians such as Dr Tom Close of Rwanda, who uses melody and rhythm not only to entertain but to educate, console, and mobilize communities for health. These figures affirm that the doctor's work is never only biological repair; it is also the careful listening to stories, the shaping of meaning, and the translation of suffering into forms that can be shared, understood, and ultimately healed.

The collection of this house, with the realism and precision of its moulages and models, demonstrates the direct connection between scientific observation and artistic creation, between aesthetics and sober documentation. It shows a line of work that begins with the advent of modern science and leads to the artistic works used in our contemporary teaching, including those we now create with modern online tools.

In this context I would like to point to one of the first women in medicine who shaped the craft of anatomical modelling and depiction in a remarkable way: Anna Morandi Manzolini (1714–1774). In the second half of the eighteenth century she took over the work of her ill husband in creating ultra-precise anatomical models for the Medical School of Bologna. She herself performed more than a thousand dissections to deepen her understanding of the human body, but also in order to teach. When her husband died early she indeed became a lecturer at the University of Bologna.

From Anna Morandi to this marvellous collection and on to the American surgeon Frank Netter, there is a continuous line of art created by physicians, or for physicians and students, which has been not only inspirational but also crucial for our understanding of the human anatomy and of medicine.

In the fine arts this is not only true for the — so to speak — instrumental use of art and craftsmanship; it is also true for the fascination with health and medicine in creative art itself. Think of Rembrandt's Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp (1632), Pablo Picasso's Science and Charity (1897), Edvard Munch's The Sick Child, or Frida Kahlo's many self-portraits depicting her own state of health.

Another group of artists also needs to be mentioned: physician-writers. In the German speaking world this includes some of the most important names in literature. I am thinking of writers such as Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Georg Büchner (1813–1837), Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931), Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), Hans Carossa (1878–1956), and Alfred Döblin (1878–1957), to name just a few.

Physicians have also become actors and film-makers. From Austria I would like to mention Gunther Philipp (1918–2003), from Germany Maria Furtwängler (born 1966), and internationally the director of Jurassic Park, Michael Crichton.

Music, in particular, offers a powerful metaphor for medicine. As physicians we use music. Music therapy is an established, evidence-based method of healing. It can help to reduce chronic pain, anxiety, stress, and depression. It helps children with autism to connect with the world and has many other beneficial effects. Music sharpens our senses and our minds.

Music complements our understanding and comprehension of the world through nonverbal communication. It opens our minds to messages that are unwritten and unspoken.

Before a diagnosis is made, the physician must listen — not only to heart sounds or laboratory values, but to the story, the fears, the pauses, the things left unsaid. A musician, too, must listen: to rhythm, to harmony, to the subtle cues of others, to the emotional meaning beneath the notes. In both, listening is an act of respect and of humility.

Both medicine and music demand years of training, patience, and relentless practice. Both require teamwork. No orchestra can create harmony if each player performs only for themselves; no health system can heal effectively without collaboration, trust, and shared purpose. And in both, technical mastery alone is not enough. It is the human interpretation — the art — that transforms sound into music and treatment into healing.

We are living in an age of extraordinary technological advancement. Artificial intelligence, genomics, robotics, and digital platforms are reshaping healthcare at unprecedented speed. These developments hold immense promise. Yet they also make it more important than ever to preserve the human core of medicine. Algorithms can analyse, but they cannot console. Machines can predict, but they cannot empathise. Data can inform, but it cannot replace presence, touch, or moral judgment.

This is where culture and the arts play a vital role. They remind us of what it means to be human. They give language to suffering, shape to hope, and form to solidarity. Music, in particular, crosses borders that politics and language cannot. It speaks directly to the heart. It unites people of different nations, beliefs, and backgrounds in a shared emotional experience.

Vienna, perhaps more than any other city, embodies this intimate dialogue between medicine and music, between science and culture. It is a city that has given the world both pioneering medical thought and some of its greatest musical masterpieces. To speak here, in the Josephinum, is to stand at a crossroads of Enlightenment ideals: reason and beauty, rigor and compassion, knowledge and humanism.

For the World Medical Association, this intersection is not merely historical; it is deeply relevant to our mission today. The WMA stands for ethical medicine, for human rights, for the dignity of patients and physicians alike. These values are sustained not only by laws and guidelines, but by culture — by the narratives, symbols, and creative expressions that remind societies of what they hold sacred.

As physicians, we are privileged to witness the full spectrum of the human experience: birth and death, joy and despair, resilience and fragility. Engaging with the arts helps us to process this responsibility, to remain emotionally present, and to resist the dehumanisation that can come with overload, burnout, and system pressures. Art does not distract us from medicine; it deepens it.

In reflecting on medicine and culture today, we are therefore not indulging in nostalgia. We are affirming something essential for the future: that even in the most technologically

advanced healthcare systems, healing will always depend on humanity, and humanity is nurtured by culture.

In this historic setting, let us be reminded that the physician is not only a technician of the body, but also a steward of the human spirit. Let us reaffirm that science reaches its highest purpose when guided by compassion, and that medicine reaches its fullest expression when informed by art.

May this Congress, like the Josephinum itself, stand as a space where knowledge and humanism, precision and creativity, come together in service of health, dignity, and peace.

Thank you.