Baylor medical humanities students are encouraged to see the bigger picture and treat patients as more than just symptoms.

Baylor University’s groundbreaking medical humanities program is training future doctors who will not only be skilled clinicians and researchers, but will have the interpersonal skills and empathy required to treat patients as human beings — and not just medical cases.

“What we try to do in the medical humanities program is equip students with skills to deliver good medical care while not losing the natural empathy they have for people,” said program director, Dr. James A. Marcum. “Those are the kinds of physicians who are going to be able to connect with patients.”

To describe Baylor’s medical humanities program accurately, it might be helpful to start by explaining what the program is not — namely, it is not a less rigorous path to medical school that substitutes easier humanities classes for harder ones in the sciences.

“This is not about either getting a medical humanities degree or being educated in the sciences,” Dr. Lauren Barron, associate director of the medical humanities program, said. Barron, a physician who still sees patients on a limited basis, said medical humanities students must pass all science courses required of traditional prehealth students, in addition to 30 extra hours of medical humanities courses.

Those additional courses include surveys of the health profession and the doctor-patient relationship, as well as classes on topics such as medical ethics and research, critical thinking, death and dying, and disability and society. There are also classes that introduce students to the intersections of medicine with philosophy, Christian spirituality and the visual arts.

“This gives students a chance to explore other areas they may be interested in that complement what they’re doing in medicine,” Barron said.

Estela Rodriguez Alonso, a future geriatrician, is one of a number of medical humanities students who volunteer at a local hospice. She said what she learned in her “Death and Dying” class about terminally ill patients has taught her valuable lessons she’s already put to use.

“Knowing how to treat and communicate with (terminally ill people), how to be compassionate and understanding with them, and how to support them emotionally, is important,” Alonso said.

Thanks to his time in another course, medical humanities major Tyler Jones discovered his calling.
“The class looked at the physician-patient relationship and the meaning of suffering,” Jones said. “It was in that class I realized I wanted to be a doctor. It’s where I found the meaning and purpose for what I was doing, and I got really excited about it. It made me want to go out there and do this every single day of my life.”

Baylor’s medical humanities program had its beginning in the 1990s, when faculty members from both the humanities and sciences were compelled to offer a class that asked future healthcare professionals to think about the intersection of medicine and the humanities.

Dr. William Hillis, Baylor’s Distinguished Professor of Biology, taught that first medical humanities class with English professor Ann Miller and associate philosophy professor Dr. Kay Toombs. “We believed that future doctors should be exposed to the humanities to learn how to be better human beings,” Hillis said. “The complaint from most medical schools was that medical students had all the science they needed, but they weren’t humanly oriented people. They needed to have basic skills in bedside manner and know about ethics.”

Interest grew, and a minor in medical humanities was created in 2000. When Baylor began offering a major in 2006, it became the first university in America with an undergraduate degree in medical humanities.

Medical humanities students have opportunities outside of classes to expand their knowledge. One of the highlights of each year is the annual medical humanities retreat, where students hear from esteemed physicians and medical experts from across the country. Students can also take part in organizations such as the Baylor Medical Ethics Discussion Society, and this past spring the medical humanities program sponsored its first medical missions trip (see story on following page).

As Baylor graduation approaches, students have found that the medical humanities major helps them with one of their most immediate concerns — getting into medical school. 

Jaden Schupp, a Rhodes Scholarship finalist who graduated from Baylor with a medical humanities degree in spring 2013, is now enrolled at Baylor College of Medicine. She said her unique background gave her an edge when applying.

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—Dr. James Marcum

In all my medical school interviews they asked me about the medical humanities program, Schupp said. “They wanted to know what I had gleaned from my experiences there. I think it was definitely beneficial to my application.”

Once someone begins medical school, exposure to the humanities gives that person an additional edge, Marcum said. “What I’ve heard from some medical school administrators is that students who have a medical humanities background perform better, especially during the final two years when they are working with patients in the clinic,” he said. “They have the better people skills and do a lot better applying the science in the clinic. They’re more mature in their ability to address the human condition.”

Marcum said a medical humanities background will prove even more valuable beginning in 2015, when the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) adds a section requiring students to answer questions on behavioral and social medicine, ethics and critical thinking—all subjects taught in Baylor’s program.

Once medical humanities students finish medical school and begin practicing, Barron believes they will not only be better critical thinkers, but they are better able to go the distance. “I get emails back from my students saying, ‘I’m not burned out on the sciences like a lot of my colleagues are,’” Barron said. “It’s a richer experience for them, and while I can’t prove it, I can’t help but think that their satisfaction is going to be greater. That’s going to translate into patient satisfaction.”

The advantages of Baylor’s medical humanities program have not been lost on prospective students, many of whom learn about it before starting at the University. The program’s popularity has meant that it must turn away applicants each year. “We currently have about 200 students enrolled in medical humanities, and we could easily have 300 or 400 if we had the resources,” Marcum said. 

One great boon to the program’s future has been financial gifts from the DeBakey Medical Foundation. The Foundation has invested $1 million in the DeBakey Endowed Scholarship in Medical Humanities over the past four years, allowing top students to qualify for two-year, $5,000 scholarships. “Medical humanities is a program that is now on the cutting edge; it’s one that other programs across the country are trying to emulate,” Dr. Lee C. Nordt, Baylor College of Arts & Sciences dean, said. “It validates the program to have that type of support from a world-renowned medical foundation.”

“Going to this medical school and interacting with the students and faculty there gave our students a real perspective on what their medical education is going to look like,” Dr. Lauren Barron, associate director of the medical humanities program, said. “It also gave them an appreciation for what a privilege it is to study medicine, and a respect for what physicians in other countries are doing. They learned things from the doctors in El Salvador that they’re not going to be able to learn anywhere else.”

The Baylor group interacted with students, faculty and staff at the Universidad Evangelica medical school, spending two days accompanying them on rounds at a public hospital.

Dr. Elaine Lambert, a California rheumatologist and Baylor alumnus, accompanied the group on the trip. “We got the chance to see the Salvadorans in their teaching rounds and taking care of patients, and we marveled at their dedication,” Lambert said. “The nurses and doctors are doing their very best to take care of people with very little in the way of equipment or supplies. They’re doing everything they can to try to deliver care in very challenging circumstances, and the compassion and love they show their patients is unbelievable.”

Baylor students got to do more than simply watch others work during the trip. They accompanied doctors from the medical school out to a rural village with little access to healthcare, then helped them put on a free medical clinic, treating more than 200 people in five hours. “During the clinic (a Salvadoran doctor) was teaching us how to examine patients and what questions to ask,” Dr. Lee C. Nordt said. “We were examining patients, looking in their throats and ears, and then the doctor would ask us what we thought was happening, and what we needed to do. For me, (the experience) was an affirmation that this is what I was meant to be doing.”

The Baylor group also was able to bring donations of much-needed medical supplies with them during the mission trip, which officials hope to make an annual event.