

Faculty Spotlight: Sayantani Das Gupta

There's a new course in the Health Advocacy program called **Illness Narratives: Understanding the Experience of Illness**. Taught by Sayantani Das Gupta, a writer who holds both M.D. and M.P.H. degrees from Johns Hopkins, this powerful course concentrates on the intersection between illness and personal, social, political, and cultural realities.

In order to relate effectively and work productively with patients, health care advocates must be able to not only empathize with but also interpret and understand illness narratives. In addition, advocating for patients in the modern health care system requires a real knowledge of how physicians and other health care professionals conceptualize and explain disease.

The primary objective of the new course is to understand how the experience of illness is influenced and interpreted through the lens of an individual's physical and emotional realities, their families, and their communities. A second objective is to understand and be able to critically analyze the perspectives of physicians versus the perspectives of the patients, and how the medical system itself might promote disease narratives that impact patients' experiences of illness. The course ends with a focus on how narrative can be utilized in health advocacy and activism.

Syantani came to the course with a pre-existing appreciation for narrative. While at Johns Hopkins she wrote a series of evocative essays on attending medical school as an Indian-American woman; in 1999 they were published as *Her Own Medicine: A Woman's Journey from*

Student to Doctor. Syantani has also written numerous essays and articles on health, gender, race and sexuality and together with her mother, she has published a collection of Bengali folk tales, *The Demon Slayers and Other Stories*.

"To me it's all a continuum," says Syantani, a highly animated, self-confident woman. "From being able to understand the characters on a page, it's not so much of an extension to understand and empathize with the experience of someone in whose life you are a health professional.

"Narrative is not just a nice story," Syantani explains. "It's also practical, it helps us to understand the larger issues and understand other people. AIDS, for example, is a collective national narrative. Everyone old enough remembers before and after." In her teaching, Syantani likes to address issues of stigma and power. "Whose story is it here? Who's in control of the way we think about illness? Narrative is a tool to make sense of what's happening."

Syantani is also teaching versions of this course to Sarah Lawrence summer school students (graduates and undergraduates) and to second-year medical students at Columbia, where it forms part of their required humanities symposium. "I think there's a lot of room for all the different health professions to train together," she says with conviction. "We need more mutual understanding of our professional philosophies. We could be much more effective health professionals with more cross-fertilization." ■