

An Unlikely Pairing

Category: Connections

written by Nikhil Seth | January 24, 2023

It is no secret that medicine and art are intimately linked. Consider the utility of music therapy, the innate beauty of medical illustration, and the use of the performing arts to promote healing. As a jazz saxophonist, I have always seen playing and listening to music as a form of relaxation. But what I never realized was how connected playing a musical instrument can be to performing a medical procedure like endoscopy. That may seem an unlikely pairing to some, but they are not so different after all.

A gastroenterologist's best interventional tool is an endoscope—a flexible tube with a camera and a light that makes it possible to see inside the human body. With an endoscope, a doctor can screen for colon cancer, identify polyps, address gastrointestinal bleeding, remove foreign bodies, and more.

A jazz musician's best tool is their instrument. Coordination between a musician's breath and fingers can bring forth the most beautiful of melodies.

I started playing the saxophone when I was 13 and would practice for hours on end. Then I joined a jazz band, and that's when the real artistry began. Playing saxophone solos was a joy, and improvisational solos—combining technical skills with quick thinking—called for particular artistry and creativity. Lately, however, due to time and professional constraints, I have figured my performing days were over—until the day I put my hands on an endoscope.

Performing endoscopy, I now realize, also calls for artistry and creativity. Just like the saxophone, an endoscope requires strong hand-eye coordination, familiarity with the instrument's capabilities, and experience with the procedures it can perform. Using an endoscope also calls for something jazz musicians are very familiar with—improvisation. Each colonoscopy is different. Endoscopists often find themselves in situations that are unfamiliar, and so they must be master improvisers. I have witnessed gastroenterologists remove a challenging food bolus, visualize difficult anatomy, and even switch between various types of endoscopes in order to navigate challenging anatomy.

Musicians and endoscopists have more in common than they might think. Recognition of this may help us gastroenterologists connect more effectively with our patients.

*Nikhil Seth
Temple, Texas*