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## Tonic tunes

### **Medical students learn that a cappella singing is good for them - and their audiences.**

By Paul Jablow

For The Inquirer

Christina Pasick has a special memory of the Christmas concert in the dementia unit.

The patients at the LIFE day-care center in West Philadelphia were staring silently when she and other members of the Penn Med UltraSounds a cappella group started to sing.

But gradually as the medical students raised their voices on such tunes as "Silent Night," they drew out decades-old memories, and the patients started singing, too.

"They were the first words they had spoken in months," said Pasick, 22, a first-year University of Pennsylvania medical student from Wall Township, N.J. "The nurses were crying. The students were crying."

It was a memorable moment for her and other members of the UltraSounds, who have been around with different casts for 10 years. But it wasn't the only one.

Whether it's "straight" concerts for patients and the general public or offbeat humor for medical students or faculty, a cappella groups at all five Philadelphia medical schools find the singing a creative outlet, a bonding experience, and a release from the stresses of the classroom and the lab.

Some, like the UltraSounds' musical director, Darryl Powell, of East Oak Lane, have musical backgrounds - his is in gospel choir. Others have never sung in a group. But all treasure the camaraderie.

"Playing or singing in a large group hides the fact that I'm not very good at it," said Andrew Stern, 23, a second-year student from Ottawa, who is known for his spoof lyrics.

Stern cites legendary Penn microbiology professor Helen Davies as his inspiration. Davies, the

oldest member of Penn's full-time medical faculty at 85, uses gag songs as a way of helping students memorize material. Her greatest hits include "Hello Herpes, My Old Friend," sung to the Simon and Garfunkel tune "The Sound of Silence."

A cappella singing, adds Pasick, "is a way to remind you why you're in medicine."

"We're in class all day long and it's so easy to get lost in the molecules and basic science."

She and other students said that the groups are especially useful in the first year, when they have limited contact with patients. And with all the memory work required of medical students, "it's an opportunity for us to use our right brain" - the more intuitive side - said Eliana Verghese, 23, of Emmaus, a second-year student and member of Drexel University's four-year-old group, The Doctor's Note.

"There's not a lot of room for creativity in the first year of medical school," adds Heather Comerci, 24, a second-year student from Allentown who sings with Temple's group, the Transplantations.

But there's no shortage of creativity among the groups themselves. Check out a YouTube video of the UltraSounds' rendition of their original song "Hemophilia," based on the Billy Joel song "The Longest Time."

"Ohhhhh, Oh, Oh, Ohhhhh. Hemo-philia!"

Their repertoire also includes a program of Christmas microbiology songs, including "Hepatitis Night," based on "Silent Night," and a ditty called "Ovulation," sung to the tune "Kiss the Girl" from Disney's "The Little Mermaid."

"We're in the reproductive block right now," Pasick observed.

Some of the UltraSounds' YouTube videos are grouped under the category "Infectious Caroling 2009: Going Viral."

The Transplantations have sung at Temple medical school functions, including an alumni banquet and a recital for the internal medicine department, where they premiered their song "Where in the Body Is Carmen Sandiego?"

"It's a lot more laid back than choir singing," said Comerci. "We do some things only doctors and medical students would get."

And given the other demands on their time, they have to do them quickly. "You have to pull a concert together within weeks that would [otherwise] take months," said Doug Phelan, 23, of Roxborough, who sings with the Pulmonics at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Chelain Goodman, 26, a member of the Arrhythmia group at Jefferson Medical College, says that the group gets about 1 1/2 hours a week of practice, less than a quarter of the time she practiced as an undergraduate at Swarthmore College.

Nationally, a cappella itself has become increasingly visible of late. Amy Malkoff of Marblehead, Mass., a board member of the Contemporary A Cappella Society of America, cites NBC-TV's four-part *The Sing-Off* show in December in which eight a cappella groups from around the

country competed.

The Indiana-based group Straight No Chaser recently had an album that debuted at No. 29 on the Billboard top 200 and signed a five-album contract with Atlantic Records in 2008. NBC plans a second season of *The Sing-Off*.

"It's really taken off the last couple of years," Malkoff said.

In March, four of the five local medical school groups sang at a concert at the Church of the Holy Trinity in Rittenhouse Square to raise money for music therapy programs at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

The UltraSounds often sing under the auspices of Musicians on Call, a national nonprofit to "promote and complement the healing process for patients, families, and caregivers."

Wendy Kaiser, one of the music therapists in the Children's Hospital program that benefited from the March concert, says there is ample evidence that listening to music can increase cognitive abilities and lower blood pressure.

In a 2008 study, researchers at the University of Florence found that people with mild hypertension who listened to classical, Celtic, or Indian raga music for 30 minutes a day for one month had significant reductions in blood pressure.

UltraSounds member Jennifer Olenik, 23, of West Chester recalled the blind patient at a VA community living center who no longer played the violin but connected with the musicians by "conducting" them as if he had a baton.

"Music," she said, "is a form of therapy for us and the patients."

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