

2018 Hope Babette Tang Humanism in Healthcare Essay Contest

2nd place | Medical Students

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The walk from my hostel to Zewditu Hospital was always the same. I would travel down the dusty roads, filled with a dichotomous mix of young people chatting excitedly on their iPhones while street vendors sat on scrap pieces of tarp and sold small Ethiopian trinkets. Each morning, I passed by the same lady who always greeted me with a toothless smile and offered me a free cup of bunna, the famous Ethiopian coffee. Her children would orbit around her as she adjusted their backpacks for school. I did not speak a word of Amharic, and she did not speak a word of English; nevertheless, we somehow formed a special bond that traversed language. Though she did not know it, every morning her toothless smile would make my day bright.

I spent my summer working at Zewditu Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to understand the barriers to viral load testing, a pivotal part of developing an effective treatment plan in HIV-endemic countries like Ethiopia. The HIV clinic at Zewditu Hospital was bustling at all times of day, with patients eager to refill their ART medications or to speak with their doctors about new complications. The clinic saw 200 newly infected patients per day, a volume I could not imagine in the United States. I assumed that this tremendous load might make caring for patients overwhelming or mechanical. But the five clinicians who managed the entire center were kind, empathetic, and patient—attributes I hope to embody one day regardless of the amount of work on my plate.

On this particular day, an elderly woman came into the clinic. She spoke softly to the doctor in Amharic, as the doctor took a detailed history and physical examination.

I observed the patient: she was pale and thin, with loose gray hair caressing the sides of her small face. She smiled at me gently, her eyes quickly jolting to the floor when they met mine. She appeared shy and unassuming, wearing a simple tan headscarf and a black floor-length skirt. When she left the office, she shook my hand and kissed me on the cheek, a friendly gesture to say goodbye in Ethiopian culture.

The doctor de-briefed me on the encounter, explaining that the woman, like many of the other patients, came in for a refill on her ART medication. “You know that patient—she changed the face of HIV here in Ethiopia,” the doctor added after a pause. I thought of the tiny woman, her frail fingers barely able to handle the force of a handshake. “How so?” I asked. “She was the first woman in Addis Ababa who publicly announced that she had HIV. Her announcement encouraged so many others to

come forward with the disease. Before, the stigma was so great that people would rather die than admit to contracting the virus.”

Though the doctor spoke to me in English, I felt unable to fully internalize what I had just heard. Those petite hands that had held mine, her touch light as a feather, had pushed forward the movement to begin eradicating HIV from Ethiopia. Those hands carried so much weight in early detection of the disease so that countless lives could be saved.

That gentle, soft voice had been a sounding board to the voiceless. She had empowered all of the men and women who felt too ashamed, embarrassed, or scared to come forward and seek the medical care they needed. She had displayed a level of bravery and courage that I could not begin to fathom.

I pressed my hand to my cheek where she had kissed me goodbye. That gentle gesture was one that seeped deep into my heart and remained locked there as an unforgettable souvenir. That day, I had the honor of meeting an unsung hero: a patient who advocated not only for her own well-being, but who also opened the flood gates to ensure the well-being of millions of people. A patient who reminded me that as a future physician, I would be entrusted with caring for people in their most vulnerable states; an honor and privilege unique to the medical field. A patient who reminded me of the responsibility I have to treat all of my patients with unequivocal compassion and respect, because their journeys are so much more than what meets the eye.

On my way home that day, I stopped as usual to share a bunna with my vendor friend. Her toothless smile was as wide as ever, and I wondered about her story. I wondered about her struggles, and her dreams for herself and for her children. To passersby, we looked to be from two completely different worlds: me with my medical student white coat, and her with her ragged shawl and traditional Ethiopian garb. But that day, all I saw was a fellow woman who, through her kind gesture each day, was an unsung hero in her own right. We sipped coffee and watched the bustling streets of Addis as the sun began to sink into the quiet of the night.

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