

## 2020 Hope Babette Tang Humanism in Healthcare Essay Contest

### First Place Medical Student Essay: Seams

Mahima Sukumar

The threads of his frayed khaki pants shuddered as his leg tapped the exam table in rhythm with the soft *tick tick tick* of his watch. The rest of Hans' body was stiff with tension, the muscles of his torso frozen in time. His eyes kept swinging to the golden watch on his wiry wrist.

Amid the 80 years of fine lines etched on his skin, his lips laid flat with the edges downcast. "We're late, Anna," he said to his wife on the stool beside him, "We have to get going now."

"Where are you both headed?" the doctor asked, looking back from the electronic medication list.

"We aren't going anywhere, doctor. He doesn't know where we are or what time it is. It's been happening more often," his wife said. She was nimble for her age as she strode into the exam room in small kitten heels. Her dress was stiff, almost starched, and her buttons were done up to the collar. Her gray bob hung along the severe line of her jaw. Her hand gripped Hans' leg as if trying to infuse calmness through the skin. Her thumb stroked a loose thread on the canvas of his knee, soothing the upset fiber.

"That's why we're here today. I think his dementia is getting worse, and I want a second opinion on what we can do," his wife said to both me and the doctor. As a student, I stood in the sides of exam rooms—a shadow of the physician—watching, learning.

"Hans, it's alright. We aren't late for anything. I promise," she said to her husband. His leg fell still but his body was agitated by the appointment his mind could not recall. He turned his eyes full of questions from the golden watch to me, and then the doctor—his gaze mistrustful.

"Hello, Hans. Like I said before, I'm going to be giving you a checkup. They are like

the exams that you do with Dr. Smith. How are you doing today?" the doctor asked.

Hans' lips sealed together, as if he was afraid words would escape his mouth. Instead, he turned toward his wife, a mask of concentration slipping over his face, as he tried to figure out why he was at the neurology office today.

"Schaffer. You have a German last name. Do you speak any German?" the doctor asked.

Hans' downcast lips flattened out. "*Ja*, I do. I am German. I was in the countryside for 34 years."

"Ah, *ich spreche Deutsch*," the doctor said. Turning to me, she continued, "I lived there as a child for many years. They were very happy memories. Most people cannot guess since my last name is Persian."

Hans' lips were slightly upturned now, his laugh lines started to furrow. "I have many fond memories as a child there, as well."

"There is something special about that time, isn't there?" the doctor said.

"Well, let me ask you a couple more question before starting the examination," the doctor continued, words of German slipping into the English syntax.

Memories of a past life washed over Hans' stiff face. As the tension released, the muscles of his face reanimated. The lips formed a fluid stream of Germanic words, the eyelids opened, seeing scenes of the past, and the cheeks pulled taut with joy.

When the interview was completed, the doctor joined Hans at the exam table. She raised her long white-coated arm to begin the dance of the neurological exam. Legs

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The Arnold P. Gold Foundation holds an annual essay contest to encourage medical and nursing students to reflect on their experiences and engage in narrative writing. The contest began in 1999 focused on medical students and expanded to include nursing students in 2018. Students are asked to respond to a specific prompt in a 1,000-word essay.

For the 2020 contest, students were asked to use the following quote as inspiration to reflect on when they've experienced or observed, as an individual or as a team (doctors, nurses, therapists, etc.), the impact of human connection:

"Medicine cannot heal in a vacuum. It requires connection." —*In Shock*, by Dr. Rana Awdish

More than 200 essays were submitted. A distinguished panel of judges, ranging from esteemed medical professionals to notable authors, reviewed the submissions. Three winning essays from medical students and three winning essays from nursing students were selected, along with 10 honorable mentions. The winning essays will be published in consecutive issues of *Academic Medicine* and the *Journal of Professional Nursing* in the fall/winter of 2020.

The contest is named for Hope Babette Tang-Goodwin, MD, who was an assistant professor of pediatrics. Her approach to medicine combined a boundless enthusiasm for her work, intellectual rigor, and deep compassion for her patients. She was an exemplar of humanism in medicine.

The Arnold P. Gold Foundation infuses the human connection into health care. The nonprofit organization engages schools, health systems, companies, and individual clinicians in the joy and meaning of humanistic health care, so that they have the strength and knowledge to ensure patients and families are partners in collaborative, compassionate, and scientifically excellent care.

Please see the end of this article for information about the author.

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moved in unison, and shoulders were bent up and down together. Little by little, the doctor peeled apart Hans' movements and feelings of sensation—peering into his neurological system.

Hans strode across the room for the gait test as he would have walked across his town to the village bakery. His fingers gripped the doctor's to test his strength as he would have tested the solid, stony, and in his opinion, the best German bread. His arm muscles were asked to glide back and forth as though he was tending to his garden of beets. He was newer and older at once—transformed into a man of his younger days.

The examination made clear that the mind was the miscreant keeping this younger man locked in the deep recesses of the brain's grooves and valleys. From

my experience this past week at the neurologist's office, I knew what came next—the adjusting of the antidepressant dosage, the reminder to make sure he did not forget to drink enough water, and the beginnings of the palliative care conversation.

Quieter now, the neurologist spoke of the care Hans needed as his memories and body deteriorated. Eyes grew wetter and weary head nods replaced the sounds of lively conversation. After the discussion about Hans' dementia ended, the doctor reached for his hands, gripping them, as if to transfer some of her strength.

The hands that conducted the neurological exam were not hands that could cure this affliction. However, they did heal. The hands sewed a seam between the patient and themselves,

filling the gaping hole with support and compassion. The new cloth was durable, imbued with promise and faith.

“Shall we go home, Hans?” asked his wife.

“Yes, it is that time, Anna,” Hans replied.

As the door shut behind them, the clock on the wall shook. Watching the second hand *tick tick tick* down the side, I tucked the memory of Hans and the doctor into my brain's white matter, hoping someday, as a physician, I might recall how healing hands sew.

*Editor's Note:* The patient's name and other details have been changed to protect patient privacy.

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