

2020 Hope Babette Tang Humanism in Healthcare Essay Contest

Second Place Medical Student Essay: The Hidden Healer

Grace Ro

“Oh, Mr. D? He’s a handful ... if you want to pick a different patient to follow, I totally understand,” my senior resident said.

It was 8:10 AM. I had just begun my clerkship year and was ready for a challenge. I knocked on the patient’s door, and my eyes were drawn to a thin elderly man lying on the hospital bed. He looked up, rolled his eyes, and let out an audible sigh.

“Nurse, I told you I need that oval pill at 8:00 AM and *now* you come in? It’s like you want me to die!”

I turned around. Perhaps he was addressing a nurse who had walked in behind me. Nope, he was talking to me.

“I’m sorry sir, but I’m a medical student. Can you explain what’s going on?”

Without even looking in my direction, he motioned me to his bed. He pointed to the lower left corner of a page in his tattered notebook. I tried not to gasp when I noticed he had recorded every single blood pressure measurement 3 times a day, and the exact time that each of his eight medications was given for the past 2 years. I had heard of patients being nonadherent to their medications, but Mr. D was the complete opposite.

In frustration, he explained to me what he probably explained to every health care provider in the hospital. He was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease several years ago, causing difficulty breathing, worsening swelling, and an inability to take care of himself. His medication list was constantly changing, and he was having difficulty following the medication regimen, which led him to start documenting everything. He wanted to know exactly

why he was being given every medication, its side effects, and its scheduled time of administration each day. As I looked around the otherwise empty room, it became clear that he was struggling through this illness on his own.

Mr. D asked the same questions every day and seemed perpetually preoccupied with his treatment plan. Our conversations seemed futile, and I realized the real challenge of this encounter. How could I, a healthy 25-year-old Asian American medical student, possibly relate to an ill 78-year-old African American patient?

So, I tried a different approach. I revisited the qualities that made him a “difficult” patient.

This 78-year-old patient is demanding and aggressive about receiving his medications properly. This elderly man is diligently compliant with his medications.

He is obsessive-compulsive, based on the way he jots down every single detail in his notebook. He is meticulous and organized, doing everything he can to follow the treatment plan with hopes of improvement.

He has a rough demeanor toward the nurses and the medical team. He is expressing his concerns and reminding us that behind all the IV’s and pills, he is a human being who just wants to be heard.

Through the rundown of this patient’s characteristics, oddly enough, I was able to relate—not as a medical student, but as a violinist.

“Mr. D, you expect proper care and attention for your medical condition, the way I expect my violin teacher to catch the slightest of errors during my lessons. You are precise with your medications, the way I was trained to perform each note by its unique pitch, tone, and rhythm. You

2020 Hope Babette Tang Humanism in Healthcare Essay Contest

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.

Acad Med. 2020;95:1700–1701.
doi: 10.1097/ACM.0000000000003624

Downloaded from https://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine by BIDH/SP/KEW/15EUM/10N4+KLLIEZGPHH4XMM/OCW/CX/IAV/7R/QR/IO/H9/3/00/0R/7T/SFHCQ3VC/YA8B9GZKXm/KEZ8Yw# on 02/12/2021

organize each entry by pill, date, and time, the way I organize my practice time by scales, bowing technique, and concertos. Lastly, you don't hesitate to show your raw emotions, just as I strive to portray a wide array of emotions through my violin performances. While I may not understand your physical pain, I admire your tenacity and sheer will to get better."

After a brief moment of silence, he looked up and said, "I was once a saxophone player. Can you believe it?"

For the remainder of our time together, Mr. D's previously vacuous room became filled with endless stories about how mentally and physically challenging it was to pursue music. Finger calluses, impossible time signatures, and difficult keys. But we also shared stories of the beauty and power of music. Inspiring conductors, perfect harmonies, and standing ovations.

Though he cracked a few smiles and laughs while sharing his experiences, I sensed traces of sadness, as his passion for music had waned due to his debilitating health conditions. I wondered, when was his last performance? When was the last time he could take a big enough breath to play the saxophone? Does he still listen to jazz?

It is so easy to see our patients as just that—patients. However, in developing this connection with Mr. D, I was reminded that every patient has a story. My patient spent a lifetime healing others through his music. He was a performer, mentor, and friend. Yet here he was, decades later spending every moment on a hospital bed, labeled by his medical comorbidities, rather than his artistic nuances.

I unexpectedly found a passion that Mr. D and I both shared, which opened the door to understanding. I learned why he

was so particular about his medications. On the flipside, he loosened the reins of his rigid expectations and became more receptive of the medical team. What was previously asynchronous, gradually became symphonious.

This interaction inspired me to always ask the questions, "So what do you like to do? What makes you happy?" Taking a few extra minutes to get to know our patients on a deeper and more human level can help unearth forgotten passions that were once dear to them. This reminder of their unique experiences can empower them to continue to find meaning in their lives, no matter what circumstances they may face.

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

G. Ro is a fourth-year medical student, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, Newark, New Jersey; email: gsr48@njms.rutgers.edu.