

PEDS REFLECTION PROJECTS

Austin Franklin, Nolan Brown, Gianna Fote

Dear Team Inpatient/Outpatient, Thank you for tackling the devastating “two-worlds phenomenon.” Many physicians, nurses, and other healthcare practitioners have commented on this – the way life in the “outside” world goes on more or less normally (sometimes less but relatively speaking...), while the “inside” world of the hospital is filled with unimaginable pain, suffering, isolation, death – and increasingly anger, hostility, demandingness, and mistrust. It is all too easy for this separation and lack of understanding to result in burn-out, cynicism, and disillusionment among physicians and others who are struggling every day to stem the pandemic tide and save lives that sometimes almost do not seem to want to be saved.

Gianna, you articulated eloquently how hard it is to make some “out-patient” parents understand the potentially terrible consequences of not vaccinating their kids or taking other mitigating steps; and how, even if they have few worries for their own children, how many immunocompromised and medically fragile children exist in the world who depend on these parents’ actions to keep them safe.

Austin, I resonated with your description of the medical bubble, the world in which we live that is guided by science and logic and rationality and care for others. Almost everyone we know does what we consider to be “the right thing.” But beyond the bubble, there is widespread anti-scientism, mistrust, fear, denial, and even hatred. It is disquieting to see how divided our country has become. Until we can look clear-sightedly at where we are, which is what your sobering comments urged us to do, we have no hope of healing.

Nolan, you made an excellent point that the structure of the project appealed first to emotions, through moving personal narratives; and then to rational thought by dispelling or qualifying prevalent erroneous or distorted beliefs about the risks of vaccination for children and adolescents vs. the risks of COVID itself. As you noted, emotion can be a strong motivator; but if as a country we lose trust in science to guide us through future pandemics and other health catastrophes, we are reverting back to the Dark Ages.

Team, the pamphlet you all created would indeed be a valuable resource for parents, precisely because of the balance you strike between appeals to the heart and appeals to the head. It is a wonderful example of helping doctors and patients/parents find paths toward each other, through both stories and science.

Thank you for such thoughtful and honest work. Dr. Shapiro

Haden Oliphant, Fares Al-Khouja, Jaspal Bassi, Mahan Naeim

Dear Team Sleep, thank you first for raising at least my consciousness (and possibly that of some of your classmates) about issues of sleep deprivation among children and adolescents. If I had been thinking more alertly, I would have realized that anxiety, depression, stress and PTSD, all of which affect young people, often are accompanied by sleep disturbances. So thank you for calling this important issue to our attention. Not only did your delightfully soporific pamphlet contain both useful resources and evidence-based strategies (consistent bedtime and sleep-time; dark, cool, quiet room; and the worst bugaboo of all, limiting screen-time) for improving sleep quality, but the

presentation itself made it more likely that the future pediatricians and family docs in your class would ask screening questions about sleep and alert parents to the problem of sleep issues in their children. The examples you gave were also very helpful in showing how sleep difficulties might present in kids.

It was telling that, despite your outstanding research and your own acknowledged sometimes less-than-optimal sleep habits, it was difficult for all of you to implement these valuable strategies in your own lives because of your schedules (i.e., your lives). I think this is a good reminder that, as with any medical recommendation, it is only as good as its relevance to people's individual circumstances. Patients, like doctors, have complex lives and cannot always exercise control over negative influences such as irregular hours, or noise, or need to access screens often or before bed. As we discussed, the key is knowing in which direction the research points us; and then figuring out how to apply it in meaningful ways to your patient's lived experience.

Thanks for such an informative project. Best, Dr. Shapiro

Luke Shah, Harrison Lam, Sophie Sha, William Chen

Dear Team Storytellers, I can't imagine a more valuable practice than to ask yourselves periodically, what matters about this patient's story? I promise that the answers you find will lift your spirits and remind you of why you entered this profession.

Sophie, your story about shared experiences and language was a touching reminder of how trust is built. And it starts with having the interest and the courage to simply ask about someone's story. In doing so, it is surprising how often you can find common ground.

Harrison, you made the excellent point that language can be a bridge, but it can also be a barrier. Doctors often think they have communicated when patients are sure they have not. Neither is wrong, but communication clearly has failed. It is up to the physician to ensure that communication is respectful, effective, and meaningful.

Will, I loved your awareness that medicine is not EITHER fulfilling OR difficult, but both/and. There is no question that, as medical students, you have the great privilege of sharing profound moments of other people's lives. It is also true that you must often witness great pain, suffering, as well as struggle against the limits of medicine. Learning how to accept both of these into your lives as physicians is an ongoing exploration that will likely last throughout your careers. I doubt you will find any definitive answers, but I also hope that you will find a balance that is sustaining for you.

Luke, I respected your courage in recognizing that illness is not separate from the social and structural realities of life. Too many physicians, perhaps from fear of being overwhelmed, prefer to focus exclusively on the biomedical problem. Yet that problem exists only within the context of often very complex and under-resourced lives. Medicine cannot solve all these problems, but I think we compound them when we look away and pretend they do not exist. At the least, by acknowledging the reality of their overwhelming lives, we can respect their struggles.

Jessica Wang, Qingxing Liang

Dear Jessica and Dawn, I liked your project so much. Dawn, your story-telling about the patient trying to imagine himself into a future was so poignant and wonderful. It indeed highlighted the resilience, lightness, and playfulness that describes even kids with serious medical conditions. It also highlighted the kindness and above all humanness with which you approached and connected with your patient. As we discussed, having your patient apply his cosmetic expertise to your relative make-up ignorance was a wonderful way of rebalancing the inevitable power dynamic between doctor (medical student) and patient. You became the learner and he, the authority, an important reversal of the typical relationship and one that empowers the patient. Even more importantly, in my view, this small exchange returned the patient's humanity to him – which can be taken away so easily and so thoughtlessly in the hospital setting. You saw him not as a patient with one kidney and medical complications, but as a kid with dreams, aspirations and talents. This was indeed time well-spent.

Jessica, your sketch was so evocative of Dawn's story. You captured perfectly the humility with which she approached her patient; and the empathic curiosity with which she interacted with him. The figures were both indefinite yet quite specific and conveyed with disarming simplicity the powerful relationship between the two individuals portrayed. This is always the unseen thread that binds doctors and patients – their often unarticulated but essential human connection.

Thank you both for a very lovely and meaningful project. Best, Dr. Shapiro