

FM REVIEW COMMENTS 2009-2012 24

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: Both reviewers were enthusiastic about this essay, and I agree it is well-written and tells a compelling story. A couple of things bother me, however, which I'd like to bring to your attention. One, rather minor, is that the author "bonds" with her gun-toting patient through partial truths and a misrepresentation (I think) of her role.

The other, more serious in my view, is that she makes an ethically questionable decision at the end of the story not to aid the police in apprehending the patient, who has participated in an armed robbery. This decision is precisely what makes the story so gripping, and is likely to provoke heated - and valuable - discussion if shared for educational purposes. However, although the author tells an exciting and involving story, there is little sign of reflection. Perhaps she could consider a concluding paragraph in which she acknowledges the moral quandary of her choice, and reflects on the factors (fear of retaliation?; desire not to betray her patient?) that influenced decision, and whether she would make the same situation again. I would not require that she reach resolution, but merely show that she recognizes the problematic nature of the choices available to her.

Other small points include the fact that the author (perhaps) uses her brother's real name; and in any case refers to him in a rather patronizing way. This is not a HIPAA issue obviously, but another ethical question which she should consider before publication.

Further, there is an issue of profanity in the replication of the patient's language. The reviewers did not appear bothered by these terms (at least they did not comment on them), but in light of our recent editorial conversation, I've brought them to the author's attention.

Finally, I believe the essay could benefit from a little judicious editing resulting in a shorter, tighter final product, especially if you agree a reflective coda is indicated.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is an extremely well-written, gripping, emotionally involving story that raises many serious ethical issues. We are enclosing a lightly edited version that includes minor corrections, but more importantly raises questions for you to reflect on.

The major issue of concern is that ethical questions raised by your decision at the conclusion of the story not to assist the police in apprehending these armed robbers. The way you've written the story is provocative, and will doubtless lead to heated - and valuable - discussion if used as a teaching piece (which we hope it will be). However, in addition to telling a good story, we hope the narrative essays will show evidence of reflection. Perhaps you could add a coda exploring the factors that entered into your decision (fear of retaliation?; desire not to betray your patient?) that influenced your decision, and whether you would make the same situation again. We do not ask that you reach resolution, but only that you demonstrate awareness of the problematic nature of the moral choices available to you.

Along similar lines (i.e., provocatively raising intriguing moral issues), is the fact that you engage in "partial truths" and slight misrepresentation of your professional role in order to win the patient's confidence. We all make choices like this, but we would like you to consider the (perhaps unintended) message this might convey to readers.

Other small points include the fact that you (perhaps) have used your brother's real name; and in any case describe him in terms that could be construed as rather patronizing. This is not a HIPAA issue obviously, but an ethical question which you might want to reflect on. Are you - and would your brother be - comfortable reading this description in print?

Further, there is an issue of profanity in the replication of the patient's language. The journal prefers not to publish such language unless it is critical to advancing the narrative. Please revisit those instances in which the patient uses these terms and consider whether there is another way to convey his communication that is true to his character.

Finally, we believe the essay could benefit from a little judicious editing resulting in a shorter, tighter final product, especially if you agree a reflective coda is indicated.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: I recommend acceptance of this work. One of the main issues that presented problems both to me and to the reviewers were issues of patient deception and privacy. This is because we thought it was a factual first-person narrative. It is not: it is a work of fiction. It is well-written and raises all sorts of ethical issues that I think could provoke interesting discussion among learners. It also won the Family Medicine Education Consortium Creative Writing Award, which I think should be mentioned if it is accepted for publication. It should also be accompanied by a statement as follows: "This story is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of the events, characters, locations, or organizations described to actual people and places is entirely coincidental." Finally, please note title change, as the current one is a big improvement.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II: Thank you for clarifying that this is a work of fiction. That actually resolves many of the concerns expressed by reviewers. Thank you also for adjusting the profanity! The change in title is really good - much better. The reflective coda in the form of speculative questions I think will be valuable in guiding readers to ask - and explore - questions of their own. As we noted in the previous draft, this is a gripping narrative that raises many ethical issues, and we hope it will engage our readers to think about them.