

FM REVIEW 2014 7A Comments

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This well-written poem portrays a medical student's ambivalence and negative judgment toward her alcoholic, smoker patient dying of cancer. It is an authentic, honest description of genuine feelings of dislike. After much deliberation, careful consideration of divergent reviews, and consultation with LeNeva (who also informally elicited reactions to the poem), I am recommending minor revision. However, I do so with a big caveat. My primary concern is for the unintended consequences that publication bestows – notably, an aura of endorsement and “truth”. Thus, I am concerned that by eventually publishing this work, the journal might be inadvertently suggesting that it is okay for physicians to dislike patients; or worse, that some patients “deserve” being disliked. The power of publication to confer legitimacy is a real one, and in this case the patient (being dead and unrepresented) is voiceless. Therefore, to mitigate this effect, I would only recommend eventual acceptance if the poem were accompanied by a commentary (which I would be glad to provide) highlighting the student's negative assumptions and attitudes, and the messages about attitudes toward patients they might convey.

However, my secondary concern is for the student. I think it would be ethically wrong and morally exploitive to accept her poem and then “pillory” it in an accompanying commentary, pointing out its shortcomings and pitfalls. For this reason, as per my comments below, I feel it is only fair to give the student the opportunity to revise certain lines in the poem that I – and one of the reviewers - found particularly troubling; as well as to let her know that the poem would be accompanied in its published form by comments discussing issues of power and perspective.

Given all this, the easiest thing would simply be to reject the poem. Because it raises such intriguing and widespread issues regarding doctor-patient relationships, I don't feel this is the optimal course. Properly contexted, my sense is the poem could be a rich and provocative teaching tool and could get physicians and future physicians reflecting with complexity and nuance on the meaning and implications of their negative feelings toward patients.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is a very well-written, bluntly honest portrayal of the narrator's ambivalent feelings toward an alcoholic, smoker patient dying of head and neck cancer. We appreciated the sincerity of the poem, and think it reflects the feelings of many medical students and learners (and perhaps experienced clinicians as well). As such, we can easily imagine it being beneficially used as a teaching tool for both medical students and residents.

There are several aspects to the poem that read as quite judgmental (which of course may be your point), but we would like you to think about these lines to ensure that they express your intention. Two such examples are “I imagined how you must have lived/Smoking and drinking anything you could” and “You asked him why he hadn't brought you a bottle/That didn't make me like you more.” Another similar line is “I said a prayer for you/I think you needed it” which could convey a sense of your superiority to the patient – i.e., you are in a position to pray for his soul. As well, as reviewer 1 points out, the time when you feel most sympathetic toward the patient is when he is showing empathy for you. We are not asking you to rewrite these lines per se, which would seem to threaten

the narrative authenticity of the poem, but to consider them from the perspective of seeing them in print. Finally, we would like you to know that, if the poem is ultimately accepted for publication, we would like to provide a commentary pointing out different ways of reading this poem and how they implicate issues of power and perspective in medicine.

One small point – Please change “stop with” (colloquial) to simply “stop”.

Whatever you decide to do with this poem, we urge you to keep writing. Your work shows evidence of good wordsmithing and you have already formulated a strong and distinctive voice.