

FM REVIEW 2017 5 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: Overall, I liked this essay. The topic of medical error is a really important one, and we haven't addressed it very often in the narrative essays. (I wish the essay described a more recent example, but I've noticed that it is often these early errors that are revisited again and again; and can exert a profound influence on physicians' future careers). What I liked most is the way in which, over the years, the meaning of this patient changed for the author – from his interest in cognitive errors (individual), to a concern regarding resident supervision (systemic), and finally an awareness of structural racism (societal).

This is the point that could be made a bit more explicit, so the reader realizes she is following along with the author's evolution. As below, I'd like less about medical decision-making and resident supervision/work hours in general and more how these issues accessed very deep feelings of guilt/responsibility/commitment (not sure) for the author that made him devote time and energy to addressing them. The essay would benefit if the author found the courage to reveal more of himself over the years – how this patient really stayed with him in various guises. Finally, I think the last paragraph could be strengthened by providing a more grounded example of how this patient accompanies the author in some way each time he goes into an exam room. As written, it is touching but a bit vacuous.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: I appreciated this essay for its honest examination of medical error. What distinguishes it from other similar accounts is the way this patient stayed with you for 40 years; yet the meaning of this patient evolved as you grew and changed a physician. My primary recommendation is that you make this point more explicit: i.e., how initially you focused on personal improvement (awareness of cognitive errors), then moved to institutional/systemic issues (resident supervision), and finally deepened to an understanding of structural violence (racism). I think the essay could be strengthened if you reflected a little more on what each of these phases meant to you - and what your patient gave you at each point.

Show us a little more of yourself. Initially, you note that you were “devastated and felt like a failure.” It takes courage to admit this – thank you. How did your patient stay with you over the years? Presumably you adapted emotionally to his death, but did you occasionally think about him? When you lectured to residents on cognitive error, was he in your mind? When you discovered situations of inadequate resident supervision, did you internally apologize to this dead prisoner? The paragraph on structural racism in my view does this most successfully - the other two dance around a bit. In these paragraphs, try to talk less about a general interest in medical decision-making and resident supervision/work hours, and more about how you intersected personally with these issues because of the patient behind the curtain. The final paragraph I feel could be more compelling as well – you write that the patient had a profound effect on the way you practice medicine, but it would help if you could show us this effect rather than simply tell us about it. "When I enter an exam, I think about this... or do that... or pay attention to this..."

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: Overall, the essay is definitely improved. It is clearer how the same case of medical error came to mean different things to the author as he grew in experience and awareness. I continue to find this a very interesting point that I have not seen made elsewhere. There is some improvement as well in terms of the author sharing his own feelings and thinking. He does not say specifically how the case continues to influence him as a person, as a teacher, or in his day-to-day practice, but perhaps this is implied in the examples he offers in the earlier part of the essay.

The writing is a little clumsy in places. I make a few suggestions below.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II: These revisions have considerably improved the essay. It is clearer how the same case of medical error came to mean different things to you as you grew in experience and awareness. I continue to find this a very interesting point that I have not seen made elsewhere. I especially appreciate the point about structural racism and how greater understanding of this phenomenon might have influenced decisions about care. I also feel that the essay does a better job of showing more of yourself in the context of both this case and your growth as a physician.

The writing strikes me as a little awkward in places. For example,

1) pg 1, line 51 you could just say "After composing myself from this surprise..." The nature of the surprise seems self-evident.

2) pg 2 line 30: remove "prison" modifying guards

3) pg 4, lines 10-18: A long, cumbersome sentence. See if you can revise to make it more succinct and compelling.

4) pg 4, lines 31-39: You are referring back to your patient zero, but this is not immediately evident. Add some linking language, "In the case of the patient I could not forget..."

5) pg 4, lines 46-49: Maybe just "As time passed and I became director..."

Finally, while I like the concluding sentence very much, how you've changed as a person, clinician, and teacher are more inferential than explicit. Perhaps it is restating the obvious, but could you elaborate just briefly on this very important thought?