

FM REVIEW 2017 34 COMMENTS

COMMENTS TO EDITOR: This essay by a medical student explores the rewards and pitfalls of emotional connection with patients. It is quite well-written. In fact, the author's facility with language obscures the fact that the point of the essay is not always illuminated clearly. Reviewer 2 in particular makes excellent suggestions about how the essay can be honed; and I have also added some recommendations. I think with some further revising and editing this will make a valuable contribution to the journal.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR: This is a well-written and well-observed essay. Your encounter with Nikki led to some insightful reflections on the rewards and pitfalls of emotional connection with patients. Your theme "It's not about me," is an excellent one; yet it needs further examination. It represents the beginning, not the end, of understanding the nature of the doctor-patient relationship.

Reviewer 2 has some practical suggestions to improve your essay which we'd like you to pay attention to. In addition, please consider the following:

- 1) Your opening sentence, while it grabs attention, is too much sensationalism for sensationalism's sake. You are right that a good essay starts with a hook, but please consider rewriting this in a way that shows something more important about Nikki than her nipples.
- 2) Help orient the reader to the characters earlier in the essay. Who is Nikki? Who is the narrator? Consider taking the information in the second paragraph and starting off with that, followed by the description of your attempts to interview her.
- 3) Show a little more of yourself in the essay, especially your thoughts and feelings at two critical junctures - when she says you made her cry; and at the end when you discover she has lost her housing and missed her chemo. You do a great job of showing your feelings of pride and joy when you think you transformed her life through your willingness to connect and listen. Now show us what it was like when this miracle was short-lived. Remember, the patient's story is never just about the patient. It always intersects profoundly with your story.
- 4) In my read, this essay is an exploration of emotional connection and distance in the doctor-patient relationship. This is a wonderful topic, always pertinent to clinical practice; and seeing it through a student's eyes would be revealing to our readers. However, I think you need to think through a little more what you are saying regarding this theme. Are you trying to figure out the proper "distance" between doctor and patient? Are you trying to come to terms with the limits of emotional connection? Are you saying connection/distance don't matter because "it's not about you"? We do not want your opinions about such questions. This is a narrative essay, which is supposed to tell a story. But if you think through your theme a bit more clearly, it will lead to more clarity in the way you tell the story.

We like this essay, and think with some further revision it will make a fine contribution to our journal. Please keep working on it.

COMMENTS TO EDITOR II: Outstanding revision! This medical student can write up a storm. This essay probes fundamental philosophical questions about distance and emotional connection in the patient-medical student (or doctor) relationship. It wrestles with the importance of forming bonds with patients that can help in motivating adherence to care; and how to deal with the disappointment when these bonds break. I think it will remind many clinical educators of what their students experience from the human perspective as they become doctors.

COMMENTS TO AUTHOR II: Thank you for this lovely revision, and your detailed letter addressing reviewer and editor suggestions and concerns. The essay now succeeds on all fronts. It wrestles with the importance of forming bonds with patients that can help in motivating adherence to care; and how to deal with the disappointment when these bonds break. Your role as a med student is now clear. Nikki's character emerges in a more meaningful and touching way. Michael emerges as an important, although minor character, whose apathy makes an interesting contrast to your energetic commitment. The essay now shows more clearly the complexity of the (truly unanswerable) question you raise about distance and emotional connection. It is not about the medical student, but it is not ONLY about the patient. Your stories have intertwined. As you say so well in your stunning final paragraph, you still have the luxury of pushing away the awareness, although she, unable to escape her diagnosis, does not.

You are a truly excellent writer. One of the unintended consequences is that strong writing can sometimes mask a narrative thread that is not quite sure where it is going. In this revision, you've marshaled your skill with language in the service of a more focused, clearer theme. I think it will remind many clinical educators of what their students experience from the human perspective as they become doctors.