

# The MSPress Journal

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## The Art of Medicine

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The sudden waft of bleach hits me as I walk down the halls of the hospital. That's the thing about hospital air, inconspicuously tinted with anti-septic – it's usual function is to cover up something else. I was working on the inpatient neurology service when I was sent to see a patient on the hospital's fourth floor. As an eager, bright-eyed second-year medical student, I was just beginning my journey of clinical rotations.

As I pushed the door open, my attention was quickly drawn to the colorful bouquet of blossoming flowers in the corner of the room. A small get-well-soon card was stuck between the relentlessly cheerful daisies. I tentatively peered around, and my eyes fell on the older man shaking in a large bed that seemed to swallow him whole. Huntington's Disease was hijacking his body. A single defective gene, tucked away in the depths of his genome, was responsible for the havoc that was unleashed, causing him to progressively lose control over his nervous system. Confined to his bed, at the whim of this incurable disease, his legs were beginning to manifest the characteristic, involuntary, "dance-like" movements I had only read about in textbooks. I glanced at the corner of the room again, wondering who purchased him the get-well-soon bouquet.

Deep blue veins tinged with purple fanned out across his arms and stuck out from his thin, translucent skin like raised tunnels. As he adjusted his food tray, his hands shook as if a low-watt electric current was running through them. I sat with him while he was under suicide watch. He had no health insurance and no family to care for him. Between the stutters, he told me that his brother had just passed away from the same disease. I watched his gaze drift unfocused as he recalled the early days surrounding his diagnosis. I tried to muster some words of reassurance, but they felt powerless as they stumbled out of my mouth. He seemed to notice my struggle for words, silently nodding at me through a half-smile framed by soft eyes. It felt wrong to be on the receiving end of compassion. So, I plopped down on the chair beside him, conceding to the futility of my words, and simply held his hand.

A common saying is that the fish notices everything but the water in which it swims. As a medical school student, I am acutely aware of the sounds, the smells, and the rushed yet synchronized movements of hospital nurses. But I wonder if physicians ever fall victim to the routine and become disengaged if seeing the pain and suffering daily causes them to accept it in quiet resignation. I have to wonder if, after twenty-something years, they still feel the same weight of their words when they say, "I'm sorry, but we've done everything we can," because they've spoken them all too often before. What no one tells you before you start medical school is that every day you will see people at their very worst. You will peer into their lives for a brief

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moment, and you will be confronted with the daily reminder of our shared, inevitable mortality. But I have also learned that in a world where disease is plentiful, kindness is not.

It's been a year since I last saw him but the memory of him still trickles to the forefront of my mind as I near the end of my rotations. I remember my frustration as a compulsive problem-solver in the face of a hopeless situation. However, I find it somewhat ironic that the moment when medicine seemed to fail drew me closer to the field. As a medical student, I constantly observe, learn, and try to emulate those above me. But I also have the unique opportunity to step back and remind myself of the kind of physician I want to be and the kind of physician I do not want to be. I do not want to go through the motions of caring for people. When science reaches its limitations, we are reminded of the art of medicine. While on the surface, medicine calls on our intellectual ability to solve problems, its true essence lies in our shared love for humanity.

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