outside the OR and asked what they thought we should tell the patient's husband and children. First the students got to speak, then the junior, whose voice trembled, and then the senior, in accordance with our teaching practice. We all agreed that, even though this error was unlikely to have negative consequences for the patient, making a full disclosure was the right thing to do. We all knew it. Any reasonable person would want to know there was now a metal and plastic plate in her head where there used to be bone.

Medical error has been a hot topic in the press in the last few years, brought into the spotlight with some infamous and terrible examples. Experts talk of two components of medical mistakes: human fallibility and imperfect systems. This was an example of good old-fashioned human error, the type that will always be with us unless robots do surgery — although even a robot could drop a slippery bone flap.

As we walked down the corridor to the waiting area, the junior resident apologized profusely to me. I knew how awful he must be feeling and tried to take the edge off by telling him that “stuff happens” and that this would not be the worst error in his career. It was somewhat analogous to a good football player dropping a perfect pass in the endzone, I said; he just took his eye off the ball for a moment. I pointed out some differences, too, like the fact that millions of people aren't watching us when we goof. Most importantly, we're dealing with people's health and lives.

I talked with the family while the residents and students watched and listened intently. The patient's husband, daughter and brother were there. I described what happened as plainly and honestly as possible. The family seemed to accept it with equanimity; their main concern was in knowing that the tumour was out and the patient was well. Perhaps they might not have been so placid had she fared

badly. I told the same story to the patient herself later that evening, when she was fully alert; she was similarly gracious. She went home the next day in excellent condition, her preoperative weakness and headaches all but a memory.

All workers make errors: this is one of the defining features of being human. Doctors must hope their errors don't produce harm, but whether they do or not, we must acknowledge them, learn from them and disclose them fully to patients. At the same time, patients must accept that we are human. They must try to understand the complexity of what we do, and they must remember that to err is human, and to forgive is ... human.

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Photo essay

Afghanistan: in recovery

Peacebuilding and peacekeeping — Canadian style, close up — that's what I witnessed as one of ten Canadian educators invited by the Department of National Defence to Operation Athena in Kabul, Afghanistan. Through their lens, I was impressed by the expertise and generosity of our troops, there as part of the NATO mandate to secure the environment in the capital of Afghanistan's fledgling democracy. Kabul is the most “secure” and “wealthy” place in the country, yet it's difficult to convey the disparity in privilege, safety and opportunity that separates our two countries, especially for women and children. These photographs offer only glimpses of a people struggling to recover from decades of war, still on the brink.

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Lord Strathcona's Horse Reconnaissance Squadron

In the Kabul market. When we stepped off the massive Canadian Forces “Herc” airplane on our arrival in Afghanistan, we were quickly escorted into completely enclosed armoured carriers known as “Bisons” and so saw nothing of Kabul as we hurtled through its dark, rain-soaked streets. Thus I was thrilled the next day to be allowed to “ride sentry” from the manhole of an armoured “Coyote” and to see the congested Kabul cityscape as we made our way through sunny streets like these. However, I was cautioned to be alert with the sad reminder that, months before, Canadian Cpl. Jamie Brendan Murphy had been killed by a man who stepped out of a cluster of people, jumped on a military jeep and detonated a bomb strapped to his body.

Hazards of peacekeeping. As we left Camp Julien in our “Coyote” armoured vehicle, en route to meeting Dr. Sima Samar, the courageous surgeon who now presides over the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission headquartered in Kabul, we were approached by clusters of men and boys meandering or just standing beside the road. The boys looked a lot like the one in this poster, which was issued by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the multinational NATO force contracted by the UN to provide security in Afghanistan. The poster was displayed in offices, dining areas and mess tents throughout the camp where we were “embedded,” alerting troops to the very real risk of being involved in a fatal accident. Many Afghans, young and old, are unfamiliar with the lethal momentum of these huge vehicles; the result has been accidents that have injured or killed Afghan civilians. In explicably, on the day we departed Camp Julien all the posters were being removed; it was “an order,” I was told.

Afghan boys looking through barbed wire into the Queen’s Palace enclosure.

The Canadian Forces’ Camp Julien is built on de-mined ground overlooked at its northern edge by the condemned building that was once the King’s Palace, and shadowed on its southern tip by the bullet-ridden, now deserted, Queen’s Palace. Each abandoned palace is encircled by layers of barbed wire, reinforced by sharpshooters from NATO countries on 24-hour guard under Canadian command. The Queen’s Palace was usually strictly off limits, but here, as with every stop we made, the moment we emerged from our heavily armoured Coyotes, young boys (never girls) materialized and called out for money, gifts or to have their photo taken. The only way to take their picture was through barbed wire.

A hierarchy among the marginalized.

The woman in this photograph who is not wearing a burqa appears to be a Roma woman who is plying her begging trade; the Afghan women appear disinclined to stop and give. In

truth, the women in burqas have little to give. Undoubtedly, conditions have improved for many women and girls since the violently oppressive days of the distorted Taliban orthodoxy — schools for girls are opening all over the country (many with the support of Canadian peacekeepers), women in Kabul can leave their houses without the formerly mandatory male escort — but most women still seek the relative safety of anonymity under a burqa (usually in this beautiful shade of blue polyester, but sometimes in red, black or green burqas). There are still reports of women being harassed, kidnapped off the streets and sexually assaulted as punishment for showing their faces in public. Dr. Samar noted that perpetrators can commit such aggressions with impunity because resources are concentrated on security forces, with little left to invest in the complementary justice mechanisms needed to hold assailants accountable. Hence her message, “no peace without justice,” drives home the need to bolster civil society as well as the military.