

# Reading bodies, not books

P. Mony Singh

When I began medical school, I resolved not to change. Or at least, I resolved not to give up those interests and aspirations that were most important to me: literature and creative writing. I wanted to keep intact my premedical self and experience life as a science student and physician-in-training without losing who I was in the process.

I knew medical school would be hard — my time short and my days interminable. What could be better, I thought, at the end of a busy day of lectures and a busy evening of studying, than to read some Chekhov, Allende, Rushdie or Mistry? I imagined myself sinking into bed, sinking into those books and emerging the following morning refreshed and ready to add to my medical knowledge.

The tumult of experiences, facts and patients I encountered created a rush of thoughts and feelings. I marvelled at how a patient's medical history, taken over a brief hour, was a condensed narrative of a life. I wanted to put it all down on paper. Clearly there was much fodder I could whip into narratives and weave into plots — or so I initially thought.

But I have found that I am mostly storied out by the time I get home each night. I've been taught cases based on real patients, read how illness affects people's lives, listened to a patient discuss life with a disease and chronicled the transformation of cells involved in a pathologic process. By the end of the day, the last thing I want to do is pick up a book and read it.

So where is the poetry in my life? In my first year of medical school there were half-read novels in my room, open at pivotal pages, crushed under the weight of my formidable medical textbooks. I learned a lot from my textbooks and my classes, but the beauty of language was missing from my life.

When I did try to read fiction, usually half asleep, my mind heavy with the events of the day and week, my brain steeped in the facts of anatomy, physiology and immunology, I had trouble concentrating. Graphs of mortality rates

for lymphomas, the stillness of bodies in the cadaver room, a slide of a woman with rhinocerebral mucormycosis, her face eaten away by fungus — all of these things crowded into my brain and left no room for another's imagination.

I even began feeling guilty whenever I did fish out a novel. First, because there was always an imminent exam to study for, and second, because medicine was changing me and I had no time to reflect on this change — let alone contest it. As a result, I dove into my studies early on, abandoning my "other" books, and decided to concentrate on medicine alone.

Now that I'm in my second year of medical school, I'm a lot better at carving out time for myself in order to pursue my interests — and to reflect on how I've changed. The art of separating my medical self from my reading and writing self will continue to take time and, who knows, I may not even want that separation after awhile.

When I began medical school I came across a quotation by Sir William Osler. This passage, which I first read as a dismal statement on medical life, I now read with growing insight: "Nothing will sustain you," Osler wrote to the new physician, "more potently than the power to recognize in your humdrum routine, as perhaps it may be thought, the true poetry of life — the poetry of the commonplace, of the ordinary man, of the plain, toil-worn woman, with their loves and their joys, with their sorrows and their griefs."<sup>1</sup>

This past year and a half I've discovered the eye-opening, touching and exhausting world of medicine and I wouldn't give it up for anything — not even for time and a well-stocked library. Perhaps Osler was right; the poetry in my life doesn't need to be in books.

Ms. Singh is a second-year medical student at the University of Calgary.

## Reference

1. The student's life. In: Roland CG, editor. *Sir William Osler: 1849–1919: a selection for medical students*. Toronto: Hannah Institute for the History of Medicine; 1982. p. 33.