

of time, or perhaps it is a lamentable symptom of an increasing reliance on radiographic and laboratory data that relegates interactions with patients to an inconvenient nuisance. Or perhaps a little bit of both.

I read on. Under the rubric Social History, a mention is made that he is pleasant, lives with his wife and quit smoking 20-plus years ago. I scroll down some more, arriving at the physical examination, which is cursory — most likely because the intern or resident was overwhelmed by numerous admissions, decided this was not an interesting patient or that his priority was less than other patients, or that he was dying and a detailed examination would do nothing more than increase discomfort with little clinical or therapeutic benefit. I pause to reflect, and hope it was the latter. I return to the chart, and read the plan of care: SW consult for transfer to IH, which translates to social work consult for transfer to inpatient hospice. More acronyms. So from my brief read-through of the medical chart, I have discovered a pleasant and alphabetized man who is dying, who no longer smokes and lives with his wife.

I stare out a winter window and muse over the psychosocial silence in this chart, the total absence of a being. I know everything about this man's physical ailments, but little-to-nothing about him as a person. The neglect of the individual — the person, the human being — continues, in spite of attempts to weave humanistic medicine into the fabric of medical education. And while the care of the person seems imbued in the annals of medicine, I find it woefully absent in today's chaotic environment.

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REFERENCE

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Poem

Infection: 1882

"It is blood vessels, the system of nerves, of changes in temperature: these help the body fight off infection," the other doctors all say.

But here he is, having left the University of Odessa for Messina months ago, his living room now his laboratory, his family gone to town to see performing apes at a circus, and here he is watching the cells of living starfish larvae swirl through the microscope lens.

These larvae, he knows, have no blood vessels, no nervous systems, no ability to regulate their temperature. How is it then that they defend themselves against infection?

The cells of the starfish drift through his vision, drift... and he leaps up, knocks back his chair, lets it lie as he paces up and down the room where the chesterfield and other chairs line the wall like a row of cells.

Suddenly he rushes out, almost running, down to where the wintry sea slowly heaves itself against the shores of Sicily, and there he stands completely still, staring at dark green waves that curl and drop and die at his feet — Yes! the other doctors are wrong! Yes! — and back he races to their garden, to the tangerine hung with garlands that turn it into a Christmas tree for the children, to pluck small thorns.

In the living-room lab he pushes thorns carefully under the skin of larvae transparent as water, just as his children tumble in laughing and hooting like monkeys and his wife puts them to bed and he leads her into their room and, naked, "Élie, oh Élie!" Olga cries out and he moans in a spasm of joy and all the night long cannot sleep.

Until with the rise of the sun, before anyone else is awake, he places the larvae under the lens and sees by a pale but gathering light that cells have surrounded the thorns all around, walling them off.

And now, Élie Metchnikoff knows, now *that* is how bodies fight off infection.

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