

Lifeworks

Physicians as patients: a narrative patchwork

Centering Ourselves as Patients

Suzanne Watters MD and

Lindsay Zier-Vogel MA

The University of British Columbia Health

Clinic and the Family Practice Centre

British Columbia Women's Hospital

Vancouver, British Columbia

February 18–September 2008

During medical training, a great deal of time is focused on being “patient centered,” but there is a dearth of instruction on how we can centre ourselves as patients. Yet, there is an inherent value in this perspective because when physicians become patients that experience may allow them to develop empathy and greater understanding for their patients. To fill this void in instruction, we decided to explore the physician-as-patient perspective and convey it through a quilt art installation.

We conducted interviews with Canadian physicians from 6 different regions across Canada, each of whom was at different stages in her or his career and was suffering from a different disease. We asked them to answer 3 questions: How did you feel when you were first diagnosed? How did someone or something in health care affect you in a positive way? How did you adapt to your health challenges?

Their responses were then integrated into patchwork squares, 24 of which was woven into 3 quilts, each one featuring the answers to 1 of the above questions. In addition to the 8 patchwork statements, each quilt has a centre pocket containing a small book with additional statements from the physicians.

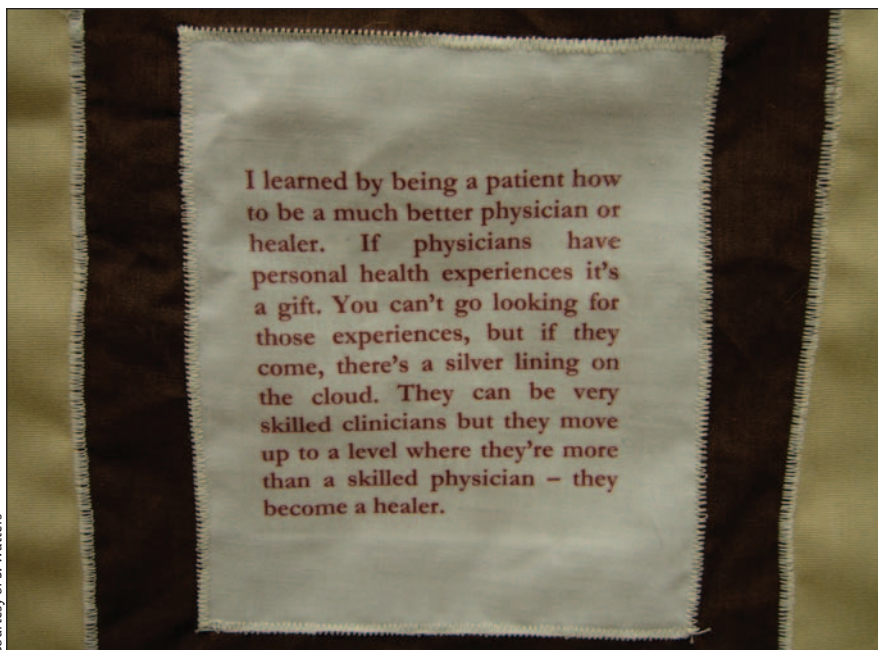
These quilts are designed to convey the commonality of the illness experience and provide a narrative account of the physician–patient's personal experience. The quilt format brings together this eclectic content, allowing for the presentation of a patchwork of ideas that prompt the viewer to reflect on what it is like to be a patient, in-



Courtesy of S. Watters

Suzanne Watters and Lindsay Zier-Vogel, *Centering Ourselves as Patients* (2007).

Cotton, handmade paper and bamboo. 90 × 75 cm. These 3 quilts depict the gamut of the physician-as-patient experience. The centre patch is a pocket containing a handmade-paper book with more observations from physicians.



Courtesy of S. Watters

Suzanne Watters and Lindsay Zier-Vogel, *Centering Ourselves as Patients* (2007).

Cotton, handmade paper and bamboo. 90 × 75 cm. This quilt-quotation was written in response to the question: “How did you adapt to your health challenges?”

cluding the intense feelings and fears that many experience.

Most importantly, for the viewer, the quilts can be explored to varying degrees depending upon how much time the observer has to spend looking at the installation.

The quotations in the first quilt reflect pride in being able to achieve physical goals while an illness is in remission, the patient's feeling of isolation when their illness separated them from their peers and the anger associated with miscommunication.

Book review

In the line of duty

"Our Gallant Doctor" Enigma and Tragedy: Surgeon Lieutenant George Hendry and HMCS Ottawa, 1942

James Goodwin

Toronto: Dundurn Press; 2007

280 pp \$35.00 ISBN 978-1-55002-687-0

Hero is a troublesome word. Usually it is conferred like a medal, but unlike a medal, it is rarely claimed. Indeed, my readings and a few personal associations suggest there is a common response from the hero: "I was just doing my job — this is what I'm trained to do." From Winnipeg's Valour Road soldiers to the firemen and police officers of 9/11, many of those who survived reject the label. "I was just doing my job."

George Hendry would, I suspect, have answered similarly, except that he died doing his duty. In *"Our Gallant Doctor" Enigma and Tragedy: Surgeon Lieutenant George Hendry and the HMCS Ottawa, 1942*, author James Goodwin offers a convincing rendition of Hendry's story, beginning with his upper-level medical and social background in Toronto through to the tragic end of both the HMCS Ottawa and Hendry, its surgeon.

His hasty decision to leave a potentially distinguished career as an obstetrician/gynecologist in Toronto to take

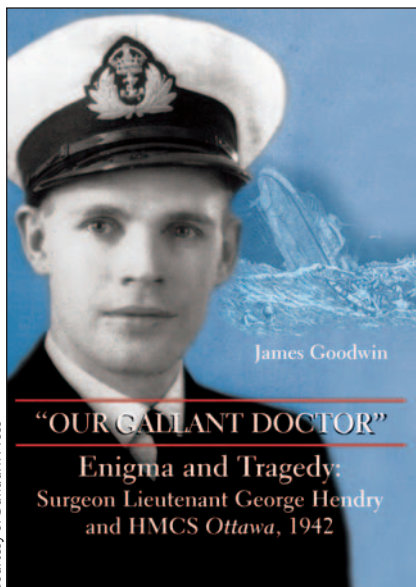
The second quilt's squares reveal the gratitude patients feel toward various members of the interdisciplinary team, from nurses to respiratory technicians to family physicians.

The squares in the third quilt reflect on the effect of illnesses on the function of these physicians with health challenges. It addresses the inability to balance physical pain with the demands of medicine and suggests that perhaps if physicians have health challenges, they enhance their ability to be "healers."

These issues are all integral to the art and the science of medicine.

Suzanne Watters MD
Family Physician
Prince George, BC
Lindsay Zier-Vogel MA
Writer
Toronto, Ont.

This exhibit is designed for display in almost any venue: hospital corridor to conference room wall. The quilts can be rolled and transported easily. For more information contact: Suzanne.watters@gmail.com



Courtesy of Dundurn Press

a posting to sea duty in the Royal Canadian Navy requires some explanation. In Hendry's case the explanation goes beyond undoubted patriotic service. An all-too-common and sometimes sordid event occurred. Although Hendry was in love with a beautiful young woman, one night of careless drunkenness changed his life (and hers) drastically. He had sex with another woman and she soon reported her — their — pregnancy. Duty and chivalry led Hendry to a loveless marriage. Then, soon after their hasty wedding, there was found to be no pregnancy.

Goodwin is not a dispassionate observer of Hendry's life. Goodwin's and Hendry's father were close colleagues in Toronto medicine; and, in his youth, Goodwin was acquainted with Hendry when the latter was a dashing, young medical officer in his naval uniform, and, one suspects, there was an element of hero-worship on Goodwin's part. This relationship may help explain why Goodwin assumed the worst possible motive on the part of Hendry's bride. Goodwin spells out the various possible scenarios, ranging from an honest belief that she was pregnant based on an irregular menstruation cycle, through to a deliberate attempt to trap a husband. But then, with no convincing explanation, he adopts the entrapment scenario as the true one. Similarly unsupported by any documentation is Goodwin's assertion that the newlyweds never had sexual congress after the wedding. Certainly this could be true, but how can anyone possibly know?

These are, perhaps, minor subjects of criticism. A more serious problem for some readers will be a sometimes overwhelming plethora of minute detail about naval matters, although this will doubtless please naval historians. Nevertheless, the account of HMCS Ottawa's last moments is vivid and moving.