

critical period had passed and there was no hope of reattaching it. I felt dreadful and returned to my tiny on-call cubicle where I cried a bit, wolfed down Mars bars and despised myself for my professional weakness.

Had I been encouraged to write about my experience, I would have written about more than a tiny thumb in a plastic bag. My story would have included a description of the hospital, which was built beside a brewery that at one time supplied patients and, most likely, staff with their daily tipple. The hospital smelled of hops and had a grassy inner quadrangle on the inside; outside, it was surrounded by huge wrought iron gates. The porter, whose lodge was just inside the gates, chimed a brass bell every time a surgeon entered; the sound would reverberate through the wards ... and so on.

Taking the narrative stance and assuming authority for my experience would have allowed me to shift my focus outward, away from my negative feelings and into a community that understood. A compassionate and appreciative hearing would have helped further quieten my inner critic. Free from its harping, I could have more clearly identified and separated my responsibilities as a clerk from my responsibility to myself. After work, I might have eschewed the Mars bars and gone and fed the ducks instead.

Acquiring the skills that allow you to have courage, self-compassion and the ability to take yourself lightly may be what is needed to prevent graduates from burning out in practice.

Hippocrates, the father of medicine and our Western humanities, was known for his compassionate treatment of “melancholic” (i.e., depressed) patients. His prescriptions included gentle exercise and inspiring entertainment. Humanities programs can help fill Hippocrates’ prescription by providing a nurturing environment



CREATIVE WORKS

Diabetic neuropathy

Today I traced my foot with a pencil,
Took a second
made my toes
feel bold, essential again.
So good,
legs straight as pencils
on 3-holed lines
Everything lame, white, wrinkled
sharpened, precise
and callous free.
I'll leave this note here
for the doctor.

How amazing, this
decay-subtracting stencil —
but alas, I can't forget
the great saphenous
disappointment,
or the catheter
in these sweatpants,
forever.
To the black graphite lines
in this here
blood-sugar logbook,
my sallow, numb calf
pales in comparison.

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in which students can appreciate themselves as gifted, compassionate human beings first, and as physicians, second.

This may be the key to keeping future doctors happy in their practice.

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This article is an excerpt from the author's lecture, *Medical Humanities: A Defence Against the Dark Arts*, presented at the May 2007 International Humanities Conference in Halifax. Dr. Strong has also written a medical play and holds a baccalaureate degree in the Classics.

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