

# My first patient

I always pictured my first patient to be  
wrapped in a dressing gown  
frail and thin  
laying in a hospital bed  
kindly, quietly answering the many questions I would ask  
as a beginning medical student.

My first patient is  
wrapped in muslin  
cold and swollen  
laying on a metal table  
kindly, silently answering the questions I never knew  
I would ask as a beginning medical student.

I always expected my most intimate patient moments to be  
dealing with the devastation of personal illness and loss  
described in words and punctuated with tears  
like the most intimate moments I've shared with family  
and friends.

My most intimate patient moment is  
peeling away layers of skin and flesh and bone to discover  
what lies beneath  
holding the nerve that controlled the hand that touched  
family and friends with warmth and love  
unlike anything I have ever experienced with another  
human being.

I always expected my first patient to teach me  
the clinical presentation of some disease process I recently  
learned in class  
the human side of disease and illness  
how to be a good doctor  
with words and stories and mannerisms.

I never expected my first patient to teach me  
that a cancerous lymph node looks like a black and white  
marble with the texture of a dried bean  
the specific sound of separating fibrous cobwebs of  
collagen encapsulating arm and leg compartments  
how to be a good human  
without ever speaking a word.

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Dissection of a cadaver, circa 14<sup>th</sup> century.

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