

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.

Alexandra Houston-Ludlam

Mrs. Houston-Ludlam is a member of the class of 2022 at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis. Her poem won second prize in the 2016 *Pharos* Poetry Competition. Mrs. Houston-Ludlam's e-mail address is: ahousto@wustl.edu.



Dissection of a cadaver, circa 14th century.

Photo by: Leemage/UIG via Getty Images