

2020 Touch



Illustration by Ryan Hadden, MD (AQA, University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Medicine, 2017)

May: As a patient, I see the doctor.
Two months of Zoom school without another's touch.
I recoil from the doctor's extended hand,
And yet appreciate that now-rare-experience.
The six-foot distance between myself and the world,
Temporarily suspended.

July: I've had three hugs since March,
Rare for human touch to grace my skin.
Now a third-year medical student, hand extended,
Toward a patient, touch-starved like me.
Is it ok if I touch?

Palpate, percuss, feel the PMI.
Sense the pulse, the muscle belly contractions.
Occlude the jugular, hold back the skin folds.
Walk my fingers along the lymph node chains.
Push on the abdomen and feel the fluid wave.
Press the nailbed and watch it reperfuse.
Rub the leg absentmindedly, figuring out what to
do next.

The back of my hand wonders, is the skin hot or cold?
Pound the costovertebral angle,
Push on the skin looking for edema.
Stroke to see if my touch feels the same on both sides.
Pull the limbs this way and that, do they bend, are
they strong?
Touch my finger, touch your nose, and back and forth
you go.
Human touch or touching of the human?

The anxious patient grabs my arm,
Reminding me of the person under my hand.
I offer a reassuring touch on the shoulder, the knee,
the foot.
I hold a hand to assuage the pain.
The six foot distance between myself and the world,
Narrowed to a thin pair of blue nitrile gloves.

— Colleen Schneider, MD, PhD