


First experiences of the dying patient: student essays from Australia

The International Journal of
Psychiatry in Medicine
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–3
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: [10.1177/00912174221105841](https://doi.org/10.1177/00912174221105841)
journals.sagepub.com/home/ijp


Alexa Gilbert-Obrart¹ and Hamish Wilson²

Keywords

medical student, Balint, empathy, reflection, end of life care

Two articles in this issue of the Journal are from the Balint Society of Australia and New Zealand (BSANZ), which has been supporting an essay competition for medical students since 2015.¹ These essays are two of 45 student entries in 2021, based on reflections about a significant patient.

This biannual competition uses similar criteria to the International Ascona Prize. Students are encouraged to describe a student-patient relationship from their medical studies and to include critical reflection on the implications of their learning in relation to becoming a doctor.

Since its inception, there have been 60 to 75 entries in each competition from Australian and New Zealand medical students. Despite the distractions and uncertainty of Covid-19 over the last two years, it was particularly rewarding in 2021 to receive 45 essays of a high standard. Many of the students' more poignant essays focussed on their first experiences of end-of-life care.²

Australasian medical schools are largely postgraduate entry. These essays are from junior students as they first enter the clinical phase of training. At this stage, it can be profoundly shocking for students to get to know a patient, who then dies from a terminal illness.³ These essays may represent opportunities to work through their affective responses to those patients,⁴ as while there are some reflective groups in these

¹Consulting Counselling Psychologist, Sydney, VIC, Australia

²Otago Medical School, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

Corresponding Author:

Hamish Wilson, Otago Medical School, University of Otago, 362 Leith Street, P.O. Box 56, Dunedin 9016, New Zealand.

Email: hamish.wilson@otago.ac.nz

medical schools, there are very few Balint Groups where students could be encouraged to focus more closely on the student- patient relationship.

It is all the more commendable then, that these two students had the courage to engage sensitively with a particular patient, to be aware of their responses to those interactions, and to use their own agency in service of the patient. Similar to previous essays in this journal,⁵ both students also made useful insights about the nature of medical practice, including the challenges in palliative care for students and doctors. We have no doubt that these learning experiences will have a lasting impact on their ability to practice with kindness and compassion.

The winning essay was from Madison Booth, a 3rd year student at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. Madison has been a writer all her life and in her second year of medical school, she was inspired by the opportunity to further hone her writing skills during a creative writing elective run by respected medical authors. This is evidenced in her beautifully crafted essay ‘Too Momentous for Words’ where she immediately engages us in her deepening connection with 83-year-old “Gabby”, who has metastatic gastric cancer. While she is encouraged by the team to spend precious time with Gabby, she learns that the price of her deep engagement with this patient is grief and loss... for both her and for Gabby.

Our second author is Stephanie Lee, a 4th year student from Bond University on the Gold Coast, Queensland. She has also been a journal keeper interested in reflective writing. Her essay is called ‘Beyond the Medical’, capturing our attention immediately with her detailed descriptions of 50-year-old “Roger”, the owner of ‘Sal’, his beloved dog. Roger has been newly diagnosed with hepatocellular carcinoma.

Her empathy deepens as she sees the pain of isolation and loneliness that Roger suffers. Realising how important her connection in her student role is for him, she chooses to accompany him on one of his last medical procedures before he dies.

Both essays illustrate the capacity of these students for engagement and connection with patients who are suffering. They also highlight some of the challenges for medical students as they start their career in clinical medicine; how to engage empathically with the dying patient, what such interactions mean for them as future doctors, and how such ‘shared humanity’ might help to sustain oneself within a challenging career.⁵

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their thoughtful feedback on the essays.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Author Note

Co-curators: BSANZ Medical Student Reflective Essay Competition

References

1. The BSANZ medical student reflective essay competition: Balint society of Australia and New Zealand. Available from: <https://balinaustraliannewzealand.org/writing-prize/>. (accessed 1 February 2022).
2. Kelly E and Nisker J. Medical students' first clinical experiences of death. *Med Educ.* 2010; 44(4):421-428.
3. Smith-Han K, Martyn H, Barrett A and Nicholson H. "That's not what you expect to do as a doctor, you know, you don't expect your patients to die." Death as a learning experience for undergraduate medical students. *BMC Med Educ* 2016;16(1):108.
4. Shapiro J. Stories medical students tell. *Story Tell Self Soc.* 2005;1(2):48-61.
5. Freedy JR. Relationship integrity and well-being: Our shared humanity matters. *Int J Psych Med.* 2021;56(3):131-135.