



## Humanities and Medicine

### A Letter To My Patient

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*I did your chest compressions today.*

Beyond the facts gleaned from rounds in the surgical ICU, I barely know who you are. You certainly do not know me, a third-year medical student hopeful for a career as an emergency physician. Like so many others, the COVID-19 pandemic has stalled our education, compressing our clerkships by weeks while simultaneously preventing us from treating the patients whose illnesses caused the delay. But today, in this moment, you need all hands on deck. Recently, more available PPE means medical students can now help treat COVID patients, so I—gowned, gloved, and double-masked—run in to help you as so many others these last months have done before me.

*One hand over the other, just over the sternum. All the way down. Allow the chest to rise. Right back down.*

What do I know about you beyond the “36-year-old female” note autopopulated in your chart? I remember your name from rounds; I know you have just celebrated your birthday. I know you contracted COVID a month or so ago and have lived in the SICU ever since. The virus responsible for killing more than 3 million people worldwide has been working its way through your lungs, forcing

your ventilator dependence. It has caused your heart to fail, forcing you onto one of the few ECMO machines in the state (the other ECMO patient down the hall also has COVID). And now, complications from your most recent ECMO decannulation led you here, under my hands. I feel your ribs crack under the weight of my compressions, and I can’t help but think how different this feels from the CPR manikins we’d practiced on. You don’t know this, but you are my first COVID patient, and your compressions are the first I’ve ever given, the first time I’ve ever manually pumped blood through another person’s body.

*“Is the monitor on? Let’s go ahead and push epi. No pulse check yet—continue compressions.”*

The SICU fellow is in the room now; she’ll be running the code. My mind shifts from you to the medical team. I think about the challenges they’ve been forced to overcome over these last several months. Every provider in the room has all but their eyes covered in PPE: gowns, gloves, surgical caps, and N95s. I think about how many times they must have been in this exact room, standing over this exact bed, losing yet another patient to this world-altering, paradigm-shifting pandemic. Some of the residents on the team this month are emergency physicians, OB/GYNs, anesthesiologists. After months of working with fear, uncertainty, and death looming over every interaction, they will certainly never practice medicine the same. I don’t think any of us ever will, not completely.

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*“No need to shock yet. Ready to switch compressions? On three. One... two... three.”*

Somehow, the chaos of forces turns your head, and now you're looking at me, watching my compressions as I prepare to switch with the next student. You won't remember this, but in these last moments I act as your heart, we share an understanding of how you absolutely do not deserve what is happening to you. I think about all you had to do to make it here, how strong you've had to be. Like so many other hospitals, yours has restricted visitors so you haven't seen your family in weeks. I wonder if you have children, if your parents are still alive. As another student takes my place, I melt away into the back of the room and wonder who will pick up the phone when we call home after this is over. Knowing all codes eventually end, I think about what we will have to say.

*“Hold compressions. Sinus tach. I've got a pulse. I think we got her back, everyone. Nice work.”*

We all feel the palpable shift in mood as we realize the immediate danger is over. Your code only lasted 5 minutes, but it's obvious how tired everybody in the room is. Yes, we are tired from the physical and mental toll of

your cardiac arrest, but today's exhaustion runs deeper. We are tired of COVID. Tired of all the ups and downs of the last year. Tired of the future setbacks we know are coming. As a medical student, I am still new to patient care, and I find myself incredibly humbled and inspired to watch the team regain composure and slowly move to the next task. Like a beating heart, the drum of the pandemic continues on, and we file out, make our phone calls, complete our documentation, and take care of our next patient.

You don't know me, but you deserve to know how much you taught me today. Today, you and your care team exemplified perseverance and showed me how we continue on despite the exhaustion. We acknowledge the pain, the heartache, and the somber reality of this horrible virus that has shattered so many lives. And then, after that, we don a new N95 and move forward to the next patient. The hospital never closes. The teams within it never take holidays off and never turn away someone in need. We share a quiet understanding that we were here pre-COVID, and we will work until there is a post-COVID to celebrate. Today, you reminded me why I am entering emergency medicine and why I will continue moving forward, hoping to earn a spot on the front lines, helping in whatever small way I can.