

LITERATURE, THE ARTS AND MEDICINE

Perspectives on Pediatrics

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A child's drawing, a young girl's poem, a father's dream and a mother's inner thoughts come together in this year's "Literature, the Arts and Medicine" section as we reflect upon the experiences of a child in the hospital.

To care for a sick child is especially difficult since we typically view the younger years filled with healthy growth and development. But what happens when development goes awry? Or when a child is diagnosed with cancer? And how do families cope with a child's illness or disorder? How do they experience these catastrophes? What sorts of narratives do they develop to make sense of what has happened? A child's hospital stay evokes a myriad of emotions – from the helplessness often expressed by parents, to the confusion and misunderstanding experienced by the child undergoing difficult procedures. When faced with such arduous life circumstances, some turn to art as a means of self-expression.

For this year's section of the Journal, we sought creative pieces from children and parents reflecting upon their experiences with illness and the health care they received. Our section begins with a poem written over a decade ago, when Aunum Shaikh was a seven-year-old girl who spent a year in hospital following a diagnosis of rhabdomyosarcoma. She wrote poems about her thoughts and feelings, focussing in particular on describing what happiness meant to her. Many lines resonate with what makes a typical seven-year-old girl happy, such as playing with siblings or going to school, but it is the verses about identifying her happiness with the absence of neutropenia that startle the reader and evokes a sense of injustice. How unfair it feels that such a young girl should need to be concerned with her blood counts, or, as depicted in Deborah Winters' poem, that a mother should have to watch her teenager in pain for hours. As parents and caregivers, we wish we could shelter the

young from falling ill, and Winters' stream-of-consciousness offering, written in the dark at her son's bedside, captures that unbearable helplessness. Will Cochrane's poem follows with his thoughts on becoming a father of a child who, at three months of age, was diagnosed with a rare congenital muscle disorder known as nemaline rod myopathy. His message is optimistic, insisting that in the face of a seemingly overwhelming diagnosis, he must not discard dreams but, instead, work to transform them in the name of keeping hope. Our section concludes with a five-year-old's drawing of herself in the hospital. Her picture and title are matter-of-fact: "This is me in the hospital having my [chemotherapy] treatment." In the drawing, Noelle Austin is lying on a hospital bed covered with a purple blanket, and her bravery beads (each bead marking a painful procedure or accomplishment) dangle proudly from her IV pole, and she is smiling. The drawing doesn't appear angry, sorrowful or fearful, but captures what undergoing difficult cancer treatments looks like to the innocent eye.

We asked this year's authors and young artists to reflect upon what it meant to create these pieces, and to ask themselves why they submitted them for publication. "I didn't feel I could sleep, so I wrote...hoping someone hears me," Winters explained. Shaikh recalled feeling happy yet scared about letting out these feelings onto paper, and Cochrane was brought to tears as he wrote. A common theme emerged from these authors: They wanted to share their message. Perhaps a parent would read these words and be reminded that each child is a blessing, at once unique and mortal; or that a young cancer patient would be comforted by knowing that he or she was not entirely alone; or maybe that a medical or nursing student would gain a more nuanced understanding of what it means to care for the pediatric patient and their family. †