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## When am I a "doctor"?

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## When am I a “doctor”?

What does it mean to be a “doctor”? My time as a doctor has been colored by Covid-19. My first day as a doctor was in the Covid-19 ICU. My first patient had Covid-19 pneumonia. The first phone call I made where I introduced myself as ‘Dr. Ahlberg’ was to tell my patient’s daughter that she had to be re-intubated. The grief of a global pandemic has hung over my intern year like a pervasive fog, dulling so much of the joy that comes with being a new doctor and experience of learning medicine. In fifty years from now, I can choose to be that old doctor that tells incoming medical students about how my class didn’t have the celebratory parts of 4th year - a canceled match day celebration and pre-recorded graduation day with an emailed diploma - even while expressing my gratitude that these events were designed to keep us safe as we entered the unknown of residency. Now, 2 years into my residency, most days I still have to think for a second when the nurse asks if I am the doctor. So, what then makes someone a “doctor”? When do I start feeling like one?

Even now as vaccination rates increase and more of the world re-opens, being in the Covid-19 ICU is a reality check that creates with abundant clarity the sense of despair at seeing these patients of all ages and comorbidities never get better. How do any of us continue to go on when sadness and death is all we see, and often within the same family? Does the ever-present grief surrounding us make us “doctors”?

Last night, I was a doctor  
Not when I put in orders to give needed medications  
Not when I started the note detailing her story  
Not when I searched the chart for more health information  
Not when I prepped the room for her imminent arrival  
Not when I started CPR or checked her pulse  
Not when I searched her belongings to find a way to contact next of kin

No  
Last night, I was a doctor

When I called her mother  
When she asked how she was, unknowing that she was gone  
When I heard her mother wail as she learned she lost a child  
When I sat in silence countries apart and was present in her grief  
When she cried and screamed at God asking why  
When I made this day the worst day of her life  
Last night, I was human  
When I got off the phone  
And cried with her

After this day in the ICU, I started to feel like a “doctor.” I know that I have the degree, but I didn’t *feel* like a doctor until I had listened to the worst sound imaginable - a mother’s grief at learning her daughter has died - and knowing that I was there with her in those emotions. I was a complete stranger, calling from another country, and giving her the worst news of her life. And yet, she thanked me at the end of the call. It was *that* that made me a doctor, even if I can’t put the intangible “*that*” into words.

I started this journey halfway through the pandemic. I did not see the first wave or have to fight for enough PPE. I am immensely grateful to those healthcare providers who did and wonder often how they survived. For me, I turn to the humanities. I am not a writer and never have been. I do not fancy myself a poet or lyricist. I am no artist. Yet when I am overwhelmed with emotions of all varieties and they decide to express themselves in a certain form, I yield to the urge. In this situation when a young patient with Covid-19 was unable to be saved and I had to tell her mother, who six hours prior was talking to her daughter on the phone, this poem came to mind. I cried while writing it. And afterwards, I was able to let some of that pain and grief go. I was able to reconnect with my humanity and why I still get up every day and go back to work.

I have since had other days like this one that have continued to make me more of a doctor. I have been privileged to bear witness to the suffering of others and felt it with them - the continued pandemic has unfortunately provided more than enough opportunities for this to happen. I have cried

more tears than I knew I could produce. The fog of the pandemic is still there. I suspect it will be for a much longer time and one poem will not fix that. However, to keep the fog from closing in around us, we need to connect with our humanity and give ourselves the space to feel how this pandemic has affected us. The arts and humanities give us that space to express without judgment. So from one almost “doctor” to many others, I encourage you to be there with your patients in their feelings and then let them go in whatever creation they become. We will only make it through the fog together.