

Ways of Seeing

The little boy could not be contained. He ricocheted from chair to floor to chair to window to door. He asked us all our names and ages, spinning about on his bottom like a top. He was here to see the consultant plastic surgeon about a congenital melanocytic naevus on his foot. It was large, about 3 cm across at its widest point, and a dark brown verging on black. His parents were concerned about it—would he be teased at school? Would it turn into a cancer?—so here he was in clinic to have a chat about this naevus and whether it should be removed.

I was here as well, a first year medical student on my first clinical placement. I had been sitting primly on a chair against the wall for the last several hours observing a succession of children with lumps and bumps come in to be assessed. The surgeon always asked them what they wanted before offering removal—it was their lump after all—and so to this little boy as well he posed the question, “How do you feel about your birthmark? Do you want it taken off?” The little boy, still sitting on the floor and now holding his bared foot in his lap, gently rubbed the mark and said, “Well no, I don’t mind because once I’ve got a totally black foot I’ll be able to talk to birds.” He looked up to a circle of blank stares. “Well because birds have got black feet so once my foot is black I’ll be able to understand them!”

The surgeon grinned and said, “Well I’m sorry to tell you that your foot will never turn totally black; the mole will grow with you as you grow but it won’t cover your whole foot.” The little boy considered this then shrugged. “So would you like it off or do you want to keep it?” “Keep it,” the boy said. “It also protects me from the dark.”

It is a commonly cited estimate that medical students learn 10,000 new words over the course of their studies. What I’ve realised on this placement is that we also learn new *ways* of speaking, and of using these words. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states that the structure of a language affects the speaker’s world view, and I would argue that in medicine, so does the vocabulary. Consider the difference:

Bed 15 arrested.

vs.

His heart trembled, then paused in the middle of its sentence but alas, forgot what it was going to say.

Histology confirms metastases secondary to colon cancer.

vs.

The cancer crept from colon upwards, wisteria-like, taking root in the rich red liver, the frothy wet lungs, turning sour the milky lymph and scorching each pasture as it passed.

How we speak about our patients determines how we see them. We learn ways of seeing some things (lesions, fractures, syndromes, organ failure) but become blind to others—people become patients, and patients become their diagnoses. The process of dehumanisation is swift and brutal—personal clothes are replaced with hospital gowns that seem designed to expose more than cover, first names are replaced with bed numbers, and bracelets with barcodes are attached to limbs. We do this in the name of professionalism, efficiency, confidentiality, and safety. But we also do this because we are afraid.

We are afraid of recognising ourselves in our patients. We are afraid of the reminder that we are not immune from the diseases we treat. We are afraid of patients’ needs, we are afraid of our

own limitations, and we are afraid of death. And so we create distance—in order to do our jobs, in order to come and go from a hospital and its tragedies as though it were any other place of work. But children, who are not yet afraid, free us from our own fear and allow us to recognise them as children instead of patients and ourselves as human instead of doctors.

In front of this boy and his magic mole I was just Alessia, 30, a little lonely, burdened by heartbreak like a small hard pebble I couldn't seem to dislodge from inside my shoe. I was far from home, and tired, and looking forward to lunch, and to the weekend. I was working on a new drawing, and ordering parts to repair my bike. I saw this child see his mole, I saw how he welcomed it, conferred powers upon it, and I welcomed his presence too, as a reminder of the different ways of seeing and the chance, for a moment, to speak to the birds and be free.

