

The Universal Language

Walking towards clinic, cold wind urging me inside, with my white coat whipping at my sides
It's another day of screening patients for COVID-19 symptoms. Afterall, screening saves lives!
So to the table I make my way, "Hello sir, do you have an appointment today? Wait, please stay
I have questions to ask you and then you can go about your day." Sigh, rolling eyes. "Okay."

Runny nose? Cough? Headache? Fever? Sweats? Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath?
Vomiting? Diarrhea? Muscle aches? Fatigue? Congestion? No? Absolutely none of these?
Any exposures? Positive COVID tests? Last 14 days? Mask covering your nose, I request
A gatekeeper to all that walk through the door, please answer honestly to all questions, I implore.

Inside they walked in, a couple, both wearing two masks. Quickly, so many questions to ask,
I smiled though they could not see, going through the routine, will be easy, so careful they seem,
They stood tense, concerned, with darting eyes, shaking heads sternly, "no" was their only reply
Next thing to check, no fever detected. "Please take this sticky note for the nurse," they accepted.

Lingering they made their way to check in, gazing outside, as if waiting, patience wearing thin
When inside came a man, in suit and tie. He greeted the couple. Ah, I see, he has finally arrived.
After screening and thanking he walked on over, helping the couple, weight off their shoulders.
Translating, interpreting, I could not make it out. What are they speaking? Oh! French, no doubt.

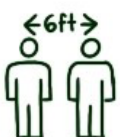
Soon after, couple now checked in, they go to take a seat, the translator leaves, his job complete
Yet as I look over, their expressions still uneasy, brows furrowed, something I recognize deeply
My grandmother would make similar expressions, with no one with which to make a connection
When the language is foreign and someone is sick, with such uncertainty, stress piles on quick.

No patients to screen, I go and introduce myself, eyes getting big, looking surprised themselves
We converse lightly in French, shoulders down, more relaxed. Stress melting, seems to retract
But soon their names were called, away they went; back to screening, feeling fulfilled, content
I pledged to use that moment, to be culturally competent. A CHM virtue and mission component.

An hour goes by when I see them once more, in the lobby stopped by staff, coming out the door,
I meet their gaze, a silent plea. I walk over, they're both pointing to me. I interrupt respectfully,
"May I translate?" everyone agrees. With words exchanged, understanding met, "merci, merci!"
They thanked me for helping them that day, but I just felt lucky, to be able to help in any way.

It's no question that these are unprecedented times. This pandemic has only put stress on incline.
Through this patient experience, I feel I did learn, the physician I want to be, how much I yearn
To act as a patient ally, who can recognize, a patient's distress shining through concerned eyes,
Have courage and reflect on vulnerability. Make efforts, remove barriers to the best of my ability.

Don't let bias judge interpretation, aloof patients may be vulnerable with extra consideration
In this pandemic, look beyond the mask, you can sometimes sense distress, without having to ask
You don't have to know the language to spring into action, the universal language is ultimately...
compassion



For this reflection assignment, I decided to write a poem about a meaningful patient interaction I had during the Community Health Pandemic Response working as a screener of COVID-19 symptoms. Reflecting on this interaction has taught me about the importance of breaking down barriers to better understand the patient's perspective, especially patients who are vulnerable during this unprecedented time. This interaction taught me about the necessary steps I must take to become the culturally competent physician I hope to be, which requires incorporation of the CHM professional virtues of courage and compassion. I also reflected on how it is important to recognize that in our new world of wearing masks, we might be quicker to make judgements about patients because we cannot see their expressions. More than ever, we must reserve our bias and mold our perspective based on our direct observations and through our nonjudgmental interaction with patients. This poem is titled "The Universal Language" and I hope you'll enjoy.

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