

Storms We Withstand

Part 1

It is so difficult to understand,
That through the unknowns there can be a way,
Standing together, this storm we'll withstand.

This is not the journey that you had planned,
With tears in your eyes, you miss her you say,
It is so difficult to understand.

Can despair be soothed by touching your hand?
Don't feel like a burden, it will be ok,
Standing together, this storm we'll withstand.

The life that you knew slipped away like sand,
The day your wife suddenly passed away,
It is so difficult to understand.

As colleagues we hold back our own tears and,
Thinking of you, we carry on through our day,
Standing together, this storm we'll withstand.

You came to us with not a single demand,
But with kindness you thanked us anyway,
It is so difficult to understand,
Standing together, this storm we'll withstand.

Part 2

It is so difficult to understand,
How doctors arrived in this position,
Standing together, in this storm we withstand.

Managing a debt of seventy grand,
With five percent interest in addition,
It is so difficult to understand.

Fighting the rising costs feels like quicksand,
For pay restoration, we petition,
Standing together, in this storm we withstand.

I want to be here, if you need my hand,
But can I convince these politicians?
It is so difficult to understand.

Pressures increased and wards poorly manned,
Our morale under constant attrition,
Standing alone, can this storm I withstand?

It is so difficult to understand,
That through the unknowns there can be a way,
Maybe together, this storm we'll withstand?

Explanation

This villanelle style poem explores the ethical complexities within the relationship between professionals and patients, which I have observed whilst preparing for a career in medicine. It is written from my own perspective as a final-year medical student, imminently about to begin work as a foundation-level doctor.

Part 1 of the poem presents a personal encounter I had with an older gentleman in a student-led clinic on GP placement. The patient had attended the practice with chronic symptoms that he described very vaguely. As we were exploring the issue, the patient's eyes began to well up and when asked if everything was ok, he began to cry. He told me and my student colleague that his wife had recently passed away unexpectedly after suffering a complication during her hip replacement. He had been feeling extremely lonely.

Although we did very little for him clinically, he was extremely grateful that we had taken the time to talk to him and even left us a box of chocolates. After the patient left, both my colleague and I admitted that we felt very emotional towards the patient encounter. I believe that empathetic human connections are valuable to the patient-professional relationship because they are humanising experiences (i.e. connections in which we treat other individuals as we believe humans ought to be treated) (Foster, 2011). Forming this reassuring human connection with this gentleman felt personally valuable because as a trainee medical professional it gave me a sense of purpose, motivation, and ambition. It is a clear example of how relationships between professionals and patients can be mutually beneficial.

Part 2 of the poem contrasts part 1 in many ways. Whilst still written from my own personal viewpoint, I now ask for help as my future self (the doctor). Here, I explore the ethical complexity within my own experience of medicine by describing aspects of my future career which frighten me and can leave me feeling psychologically exhausted. I present my experience of training to be part of a system which feels as though it will inevitably collapse and ask myself whether I am mentally strong enough to survive it. At the end of the poem, the structural form begins to get lost, with lines subtly changing; this is symbolic of the changes that are occurring as the NHS is placed under greater pressure.

The whole poem feels exceptionally vulnerable. It feels inappropriate to share the emotions I experience as a trainee clinician in a clinical encounter, that this might somehow breach my professional duty. However, I felt it was important to remind the audience that as a professional I am still a human being and this piece is a truthful account of how training for a career in medicine impacts my own psychological state: my emotions, ambitions, hope and optimism. I believe that doctors ought to be paid a wage that honestly reflects living costs, training costs and atypical working hours/conditions because they deserve to be treated fairly as human beings. Most verses in part 2 describe standing with my colleagues in times of difficulty, but in the final line I ask patients/ the general public if they will stand with me too. I often find that it feels inappropriate ask patients for support because it is our primary professional duty to care for them. However, I believe that, as professionals, we can form mutually supportive humanistic relationships with patients that strengthens our combined resilience to life's adversities - "Standing together, these storms we'll withstand".

Throughout the poem, I try to portray a sense of hope and that no-one is ever truly alone. Ironically, I believe that what will save the precious symbiotic relationship that exists between patients and professionals might be the relationship itself.

References

Foster, C., 2011. Human dignity in bioethics and law, 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.