

Zoom Out

Anjali Jain, MD

Ambulatory Pediatrics 2007;7:5

There were a few days when I was twenty-something that I pondered the question: Should I become a writer or a doctor? I decided a doctor. I must have known I would need something important to write about.

I had little inkling that becoming and being a doctor would mean an awful *lot* of writing. Becoming an academic physician and a researcher means even more. I've probably written thousands of progress notes (of dubious quality), discharge summaries, informal reports and presentations, published papers, grant applications, and letters—many, many letters, everything from quick e-mails to carefully worded, handwritten expressions of sympathy or gratitude. I have come to respect written words, and to work hard at choosing the right ones.

Once again, I find myself at a crossroads of sorts. I am a physician now, a pediatrician, a researcher, and a writer. There are more labels that can follow my name: mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend, and colleague. How many of these can I keep upright? Can they support one another even as they sometimes compete? What, if anything, does writing contribute—to my life, to my patients, to children in general? And telling stories—is it a luxury or a necessity? I want to be sure putting the notes together creates harmony instead of noise.

On my shelf sit a couple of worn journals from my childhood. I've kept those journals but rarely look at them. The writing makes me cringe. It is filled with complaints. Growing up, I tried hard to be good on the outside; I let loose in my writing. I vented on those pages—about my sisters, my parents, my teachers and friends. In one, a

particularly cruel gym coach takes up a disproportionate number of pages.

Today, I write to remember. I still grumble a lot in my writing, but it is no longer pure expression I am after. Reluctantly, I've come to realize that my grievances are not the isolated, random events I had once imagined them to be. Instead, they point to a significant emotion. And writing about that feeling—digging deeper—helps me decipher how I think and feel. But something else also happens when I write. In fishing around this language we share, searching for the right word to affix a thought, I begin to see myself from above. I zoom out. I become every doctor or every mother, not just myself. My own story feels like part of a human drama. I think about how many times and places similar stories are played out. In speaking to an imaginary reader through words, I share an experience, and discover its meaning.

In medicine, we rely on the similarities between the body of one child and every other, for how else could we treat anyone if we did not believe all their mitochondria to be essentially identical and assume their skins bruise similarly? Our stories and those of our patients are unique, though. They belong to no one else.

Yet they resonate. They ring true not because they are rare, but because their elements are common—perhaps universal.

We work in offices and clinics and hospitals. The scenes outside our windows look different: trees or cactus; ocean, mountain, or slum. But the little rooms we practice in are probably similar: a plain wall, an otoscope, a table, a chair. Once in a blue moon, we learn something from a patient or an experience that transforms the way we work. We think, "If only I had known sooner. If only someone had told me."

This column is a place for telling the stories that affect and shape us. In these pages, we can find understanding and recognition. We dream it might become a home base for the experience of general pediatrics, a place to go between flights, where we can reveal ourselves safely.

So, go on. Write one sentence, one absolutely honest sentence. And see what happens.

From the Center for Health Services and Community Research, Children's Research Institute, Children's National Medical Center, Washington, DC.

Address correspondence to Anjali Jain, MD, Center for Health Services and Community Research, Children's Research Institute, Children's National Medical Center, 111 Michigan Ave, Washington, DC 20010 (e-mail: ajain@cnmc.org).