
FIELD NOTES | FALL 2020

I Miss Touching My Patients

By Kajsa Vlastic

In January, halfway through my intern year of training, my co-residents and I took a personality test that split us into four separate color groups. I matched into the blue cohort: *nurturing, collaborative, relationship-focused*. I was not surprised in the least by my results. I looked to my right and saw A -- my fellow lover of hugs -- and we broke into laughter.

In medical school I had a tight-knit group of girlfriends who always described me by my invasion of personal space -- hugs and cheek kisses and intimate greetings in hospital hallways. I remember being embarrassed by their noticing at first, but I grew to embrace it. Perhaps it's my European mother's influence, all of these affectionate hellos and goodbyes, or perhaps it's more biologic than I realize.

One of my favorite parts of being a pediatric resident is gaining the trust of my patients over the course of a visit. I remember feeling incredibly nervous about knowing how to interact appropriately as a physician initially, but over the last few years I have started to really lean into who I am.

I sit on the edge of the bed.

I lower my stool or squat so my eye level matches that of my patient. (A skill remembered from interactions with my own pediatrician many years ago.)

I like to kick off clinic visits reading a few pages from picture books.

And if my toddler patients even then hide behind the door or on the opposite side of the exam table from me, I give them time to emerge at their own pace while I speak to the adults in the room.

No rush. We've got time.

By the end, I usually get high fives, giggles and give little shoulder squeezes while they walk out the door.

Trust gained: check.

Especially in the community where I work, I take the act of making hospital visits safe and attentive experiences for my kids very seriously.

Fast forward to a completely new world. Our completely new world. It's now Spring 2020.

I walk into the room of one of my hospitalized patients in April and I initially imagine this three-year-old thinking I look like a monster from one of the story books she has at her bedside. If she does, her face does not show an ounce of fear.

I am clad in a plastic blue gown, a massive face shield separating my face from hers, my muffled voice coming through a well-used N-95 mask. I notice that I am rushing through the exam: listening to her heart and lungs, gently feeling her neck for lymph nodes, I push on her abdomen to ensure it's still soft. As I peak a view into the backside of her mouth with my pen light, she continues to position her doll in front of my face asking me if I can play. My muscles feel tense while she sits calmly amidst the sheets that seem to engulf her small body. I am trying to touch this young child as little as possible, shallowly breathing behind my own mask, my heart racing and my eyes darting back up to the clock more often than I would normally ever allow.

I hear the words of my attending in the back of my mind on repeat: *Limit your exposure.*

My patient goes to touch my hand, curious about the slick glove resting on top of my skin, and I withdraw. My heart sinks.

She's only being curious, damn't.

We are many months into this pandemic and I have not gotten used to the way I now behave as a physician: I miss touching my patients.

There, I said it. I crave rocking the babies, fist-bumping my third-graders as they tell me what they're learning about at school and sitting close as my teenagers share honest and intimate details of their lives. The hospital is supposed to be a safe space for them, but even I know that's not completely true in the current state of the world.

I have been doing a lot of thinking about what this lack of touch means for the future of our current children and young adults. I fear this "new normal" is going to have severe consequences on their development, especially their future relationships with other people. Compassionate touch plays such an incredible role in defining who we are as human beings -- and I believe helping children learn how to engage in touch safely is a big part of my job.

Keep the elbow bumps coming -- for now, it's all we have.

Kajsa Vlastic is a pediatric resident physician in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who completed her undergraduate and medical studies at the University of Utah. She is passionate about the care of underserved children and their families, social influences on health, social justice in relation to medicine and the role of narrative medicine and the medical arts in medical training.
