Murmurs: Stories from Our Journey in Medicine
Episode 4: Dear Anonymous Donor
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Podcast Transcript

Speakers
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Hugh Silk 00:21
Welcome back to the podcast Murmurs: Stories from Our Journey in Medicine. This podcast series is meant to act as a reflective experience for the way health providers and those in training think about their patients in medicine. Not so much about how they make diagnoses, but about how they relate to their patients, continue to think about them long after a visit, and what makes doctors and nurses tick. Each episode we will interview someone from UMass Medical School who has written a creative piece and listen to the story behind it. The hope is that this podcast will inspire others to be more reflective practitioners as well.

Qiuwei Yang 01:02
Hi, my name is Qiuwei.

Divya Bhatia 01:04
And I'm Divya. Today we will be interviewing Bridget Yang, a second-year medical student here.

Bridget Yang 01:09
Hi, everybody. Thanks for having me here.

Divya Bhatia 01:11
We will be hearing Bridget's piece, Dear Anonymous Donor. So in medical school, we have a practical component of our anatomy class. And every year there are a large number of donors who make it possible for us to learn anatomy through hands on experiences in the lab. And then in the spring of every year, we honor the donors that we had the opportunity to learn from. And there's this beautiful ceremony where we gather together with their family and loved ones and we honor the donors and thank them for the generous gift that they made to us as students. So this poem was first read at the donor ceremony last year, and today we have the opportunity to hear it from Bridget again. So without further ado, here's Bridget.

Bridget Yang 01:55
Dear Anonymous Donor.
Dear Anonymous Donor
I knew I would meet you around the time when Fall starts to bloom,
When the air begins to chill, a sensation on my skin that followed into the room.
They told me you would be waiting, lying serenely supine
The covers draped over you – does your skin feel the autumn air like mine?
In my navy apron, falling almost to my feet
I hovered over your body, ready to meet
I thought I had been prepared all this time
Yet I was not expecting the strength of your presence.

I had only seen plastic anatomical models, with symmetric proportions and spotless parts
But you were more than what I had learned from books – you were perfectly human, each groove, an art
As I looked closer I could feel that there was a story
Dear Anonymous Donor, what were once your dreams, your worries?
I stood in silence, wondering what you knew
When you wrote us your handwritten message, and how these details make you, you.
In neat ink, you printed your legacy across smoothened pages
A cloth over your eyes held back memories from past ages
It reminded me you had your own unique life,
I will not forget your generosity; in my memories, you survive.
me you've had your own unique life. I will not forget your generosity in my memories, you survive.

Qiuwei Yang 03:29
Thank you so much for sharing your poem, Bridget.

Divya Bhatia 03:31
It was beautiful.

Bridget Yang 03:32
Thank you.

Divya Bhatia 03:33
So what drove you to write this poem?

Bridget Yang 03:35
I wrote this poem sometime last year when we started learning anatomy. We had one class, it was the first class where we went into the lab. And immediately after the first class, I felt a lot of emotions after meeting our donor for the first time. So I actually immediately went into the Library and wrote this poem. I don't usually write a lot of poems. I wouldn't call myself a poet. You know, I never, I never shared poems before. It's not like I entered competitions. But I think that anyone could express feelings through poetry. So that's what I did.

Qiuwei Yang 04:14
What were your feelings when you met your anonymous donor for the first time?

Bridget Yang 04:17
That's a really good question. I think that I had a lot more feelings than I expected and things were a lot more personable than I had expected. When I first heard about anatomy and learning about the body, I expected it to be purely scientific, very detached, educational, logical. But when I walked into the lab, I realized that they were people who dedicated their bodies for this. These are people who had unique lives and stories. So I felt a sudden rush of emotion that I wasn't really expecting. I think that there were other people who were caught by surprise because it wasn't something that I think that I personally think is not talked about often. So that's why the surprise element I think, was a big part of it. And so I wanted to write that down.

Qiuwei Yang 05:09
I definitely agree. I've heard stories where students are perfectly fine. And then they see that their donor has a little tattoo somewhere.

Bridget Yang 05:18
Yeah.

Qiuwei Yang 05:19
Or like that kind of element that makes it very unique to that person. And then you kind of think about how like, oh, like, what led them to get this tattoo? What does it signify? And I think that all those emotions of like, Oh my gosh, like, this is someone who was loved by many people. And now here they are. And it's because of their generosity that we will learn more about medicine.

Bridget Yang 05:40
Yeah, I completely agree. I for some reason, thought that the process somehow masked us from seeing that side of people, that they would just be presented as you know, here is the liver. But I never thought about the fact that you might like you said, see a tattoo or see something that hinted at their lifestyle and what they went through.

Divya Bhatia 06:01
Yeah, absolutely. I'll never forget that my donor's fingernails and toenails were painted as though she had just gone for a manicure/pedicure, maybe a few days before she passed away. And I remember that a lot more than I remember the anatomy of the liver than I probably should. But it's that piece that makes anatomy human, that gives this donor a story that I remember more now.

Bridget Yang 06:29
Right, I agree. And that was something I was not expecting at all.

Qiuwei Yang 06:32
So you mentioned before that you had a difference in the expectation that you had going in and what you saw. And this kind of ties into the next question I want to ask you which is, which is a bit more technical in nature. And you've mentioned in your poem that, and I quote, "I had only seen classic anatomical models with symmetric proportions and spotless parts, but you were more than what I had learned from books. You were perfectly human, each groove, an art." And I notice here that there are a few dichotomies at play. This idea of plastic versus human, of perfection versus imperfection, sterility
and expression, abstract and applied. And these competing ideas are frequently used within the field of medicine itself. For example, when you’re trying to reconcile medicine as an art with medicine as a science, or when you comparing the experiences in your preclinical and your clinical years? So I kind of wanted to ask you what inspired you to highlight these contrasting ideas.

**Bridget Yang** 07:34
I really liked how you interpreted these ideas, how you read into it. I completely agree that there is a contrasting theme. What I expected before was the plastic perfection that you were talking about. And what I saw was the more human imperfection parts. For example, when we were learning about the musculoskeletal system, there are some donors that had really muscular arms or legs that kind of affected what kind of lifestyle they had maybe, you know, on their sheet, it would tell us what their occupation was. And it really told us a story. And there are some donors who were of an older age, they had a smaller frame. And again, it reminded me of what this was depicting. So that for me was medicine as an art. Whereas I saw it before as medicine as a science. I was expecting to be purely learning, but then I had to learn how to balance the two because I had to do what I was supposed to do, carry out my tasks, but still remember that this is a person with a story and to be able to balance the two in a way that was productive.

**Divya Bhatia** 08:44
And even though there's this dichotomy between the art and the science, I think it's really interesting when even the science is inexact every single time. And I think we've all seen this in how different each of the donor bodies that we've worked with have been. So we learned the science, but sometimes it's not exact.

**Bridget Yang** 09:03
Yeah, that was something that I found really interesting. We would all go around the room to make sure that we had a chance to look at every iteration of whatever we were learning. And they were so incredibly different, especially if it's somehow tied into their life story, if you think about what their hobbies were, or their occupation, or what conditions you know, that's listed on the sheet, and there's so much more to tell outside of this piece of paper that we were given. But all that affects someone you know, all that accumulates into what you see in front of you. So I think it was really cool to go around and see all the variations and what that might have told about someone's life.

**Divya Bhatia** 09:46
Yeah, I agree with that. And I remember that a lot of what we learn is in the textbooks, we think it's only one way but really, it's that the majority of people will be that way. Like the majority of people will have a certain pattern to their vasculature. But then it was really interesting to see in the donor bodies, that there was so much variation in real life. And I thought that was fascinating. I was like, This is supposed to look like what we learned in the textbook. And it wasn't, it was different. It was, it brought that human-ness into the science that we were learning.

**Bridget Yang** 10:19
I agree. I know for one portion, I think it was vascular system, where a lot of us couldn't even follow the manual, because it was completely normal to have something different. So we just had to explore for
ourselves and, and, you know, we completely put away the computer because you couldn't even follow it.

**Qiuwei Yang** 10:43
And I think it kind of ties into our clinical experiences too. Because you wouldn't before walk into the room you already know what the patient's complaining about. So like before you walk into lab you had this expectation of this is what it's going to be like, medicine as a science. But then the art to it is like getting in there and talking to the patient. And the way they express things is like very different from how another patient might express it. So if they come in with chest pain, they might not say the same words that another patient says, but they have the same diagnosis. So it's kind of, I can kind of see that too in your answer.

**Bridget Yang** 11:16
Right. Exactly, exactly.

**Qiuwei Yang** 11:19
And then in the line "in my navy apron, falling almost to my feet," there is a sense that the job feels a bit too big. Is this an accurate reading of the line? And if so, could you elaborate on it some more.

**Bridget Yang** 11:30
I actually originally wrote this because the apron was really big. We had a one size fits all kind of apron and I'm a shorter person.

**Qiuwei Yang** 11:41
I remember that.

**Bridget Yang** 11:42
Yeah. For me, it literally almost went to my feet. But it really reflected also just how ill fitting I felt for the first day. I felt that I wasn't prepared for this. It feels almost unnatural to go through something like that. Especially for people who want to be healers, so I think we have to push ourselves to adapt to the situation. And that is it is a related idea. So your interpretation is correct.

**Qiuwei Yang** 12:09
I remember, I don't know if you remember your first day but I remember my first day, it was like really overwhelming. Even though we didn't do anything, it was just like us greeting the bodies and telling them like who we were, where we came from, just like familiarize yourself. There was a lot more than I anticipated.

**Divya Bhatia** 12:27
Yeah, I remember my my first time down in the lab as well. And you're going down with the other students who are going to be your team members for the majority of the first year and it's such an important group that you're part of. And so I remember that clearly. And I just, I remember feeling upset that I didn't feel all the things that I thought I would feel, and I I almost felt disappointed that I was I was supposed to feel sad and torn and this and that. I really ended up feeling that first day just a little bit
unsure of myself. And I felt as though I didn't quite fit in that room in that position. We did feel like an opportunity then, but it just felt like a weird thing that we had to do. And it took me a while actually to feel emotional. I think a lot of people felt emotional first, and then it turned scientific for them. For me, it was kind of the other way around, I was a little bit taken aback just by the differences in how I expected to feel and how I did feel. And then I think over time I was I let myself feel through each anatomy session a little bit more. And that human part, I think, came to me a little bit later.

Bridget Yang 13:48
That's really interesting. I'm glad you shared that because I actually didn't get a chance to talk to a lot of people about this, which is why I wrote the poem. I didn't really know how to bring it up and I didn't know if everyone felt the same way.

Divya Bhatia 13:59
Yeah, yeah, I just remember feeling like, wasn't I supposed to feel sad or I don't even know what it was supposed to feel. But I just felt like I was whatever I was feeling was wrong, but that's not true. I mean, we're all could have reacted differently in moments like that.

Bridget Yang 14:00
Yeah, everyone has such a different experience. There's no right experience.

Divya Bhatia 14:19
Exactly. Yeah.

Bridget Yang 14:21
And going back to what Qiuwei was saying, I'm actually really grateful that the faculty, they knew exactly what they were doing. You know, they're experts in this. And I'm really grateful that they had that first day set aside for us, because I think we were all a little surprised by what is supposed to happen, how we're supposed to feel. So the first day really gave us a chance to ease into it and to decide for ourselves, I guess how we want to approach it.

Qiuwei Yang 14:47
Yeah, I like that. Definitely. So you also performed this at the donor ceremony. Could you talk about what it was like performing the poem for their families who came to the ceremony?

Bridget Yang 14:58
I wasn't expecting to perform this when I first wrote it, but I was really excited to because I didn't really get a chance to, like I said before, talk about this with others. So I wanted to tell everyone how I felt and how appreciative I was of this opportunity. So I was nervous, but I was also excited. And in the moment, I kind of after you know, the first few seconds, I got into it, and I was performing really genuinely because this is something I wrote that day. So it was exactly how I felt.

Divya Bhatia 15:34
I love that you wrote it that very first day, that you went to the Library that first day and you just wrote up your thoughts and you created this beautiful piece. It's so perfect.
Bridget Yang 15:45
Thank you. Yeah, I was typing away madly in the Library while everyone was studying. And I think it was definitely worth it.

Qiuwei Yang 15:52
Did anyone approach you after the performance?

Bridget Yang 15:55
There were people who walked by and said, you know, that was a beautiful piece. There, there were some people who approached me and asked for a copy of it, which was really nice. What really stuck out was there are people who actually said, That was such a great experience. I just signed up to be part of this program. And I thought that was really moving. I think that's a huge decision to make. And I'm really glad that they felt appreciated enough and respected. And they trusted us to sign up for something that day.

Divya Bhatia 16:26
And just to clarify, this is signing up as a donor?

Bridget Yang 16:29
Yes, yeah.

Qiuwei Yang 16:31
So looking back, what are your thoughts about how you felt you've changed since this experience?

Bridget Yang 16:36
I like having this poem around to remind me of that first time that you experience something. I think in medicine, it's really easy to sometimes feel jaded or burned out or just to see things as a science, to get tired of something. I don't feel that way yet. But I know that it is a reality. So I want to keep this in mind and remind myself that, for us it may be something that happens often, but for these people it is probably a first time.

Divya Bhatia 17:08
I really like how you said that because I think there's a piece in there about maintaining curiosity. And there's almost this fear that you might not be able to maintain the same curiosity from that first experience, or that first time, the first patient you see, or the first time down in the anatomy lab. And I think that's a really interesting point, because I think we can challenge ourselves to maintain that same curiosity and question each experience we have and really look at each patient interaction as a new story, a new set of life experiences that aren't just a chief complaint, and I think that's a really interesting approach.

Qiuwei Yang 17:50
I definitely agree. And I have been curious, have you ever found yourself re-reading that poem since you last read it, um, just to remind yourself of what it's like to have that first experience.
Bridget Yang 18:01
Yeah, definitely. I actually towards the end of anatomy, I wrote another poem, kind of talking about the entire journey. And so I thought as part of that, I should go back and read the first one that I wrote. So it was a really big reminder of how far we've come, how I hesitated that first day, I felt unsure of myself. And by the end of it, it felt a lot more comfortable. And I felt like I trusted myself to get to the right place in this whole process.

Qiuwei Yang 18:35
I think that's definitely a common theme, I think through medical school, because just to give some context, a lot of us have taken our physical diagnosis exam, which is basically where we go in, we have an hour to do a complete physical exam. It's not a physical exam you get at the doctor's office, it's every single little detail that we have to look at. And I remember when we first learned this, it was a lot because it was, there's a lot to remember. And it was also split out over multiple sessions so that we could practice. And then at that time, if looking forward to now, I don't think the past Qiuwei would have realized that like, oh, like you can do this and that you will eventually learn how to do a complete physical exam, not just like these separate parts, where you're just like, oh, I'm supposed to turn the knee. Why?

Bridget Yang 19:22
Yeah.

Divya Bhatia 19:24
Yeah, that's so true. Definitely. I was so overwhelmed. Every day you learn so much, you learn so fast. And so from what I knew in my first rotation to what I know now, I wouldn't have expected that I would be more comfortable with some of the things that frightened me so much early on.

Bridget Yang 19:40
Yeah. What's funny is that the beginning of this year, my friends and I reflected on how have we grown in the past year. We asked ourselves, is it the knowledge, do we feel like that's what changes, and we decided, sure, we learned a lot, but what's really different is that confidence. Is that you may not know everything right away, but you're willing to just dive in and learn it. Whereas in first year, we're all a little bit more scared thinking about how difficult this task might be.

Qiuwei Yang 20:11
I think another part of that is also perspective. Because I think looking back now, very few people have had that experience with a donor before coming to medical school. And I think very few people also knew what to expect. And having gone through that we know I guess what it's like, and so we have that kind of perspective of, Oh, we were so scared, but now it's like, Okay. And so when we look in the future, we're like, oh, we're scared now. But we do have that confidence that like in the future, like, we'll be okay. We'll somehow find our way through.

Divya Bhatia 20:44
Yeah. And I'm so glad you wrote this so that you can go back and you can read it and you can see how much you've grown in this time.

**Bridget Yang** 20:52
Yeah, I would like to encourage everyone to write something, you know, it doesn't have to be great. You don't have to share with anyone if you don't I like it. But I think it's fun to remind yourself of where you were a year ago.

**Qiuwei Yang** 21:05
I'm like curious to see what 10 years from now what the ophthalmologist Bridget is looking back at this and reading it was before she likes to use her first patient.

**Bridget Yang** 21:17
If I go into that.

**Qiuwei Yang** 21:18
Thank you so much Bridget for coming here today and sharing your poem with us.

**Bridget Yang** 21:23
Yeah, of course. Thanks for having me guys. This was a lot of fun.

**Divya Bhatia** 21:25
Thank you.