

Poem

Stethoscope

She has wandered with me
since my first days as a physician—
an unassuming extension of my ears,
gently slung about a tattered collar,
patiently transmitting rubs, rhonchi, rales,
as I struggled to decipher them.

She has sealed herself against unfamiliar skins—
wrinkled, jaundiced, tattooed, inflamed—
to magnify each breath sound and heartbeat
of my patients.

I have squeezed her to the point of suffocation
between my trembling hands.
I have let her venture into the territory of blood-stained garments
while I maintain a safe distance.
I have dropped her to the cold, hard tiles
in moments of crisis.

She has, with loving grace,
been present for diagnoses
that struck me to the bone:
tamponade,
heart attack,
pneumothorax.

Her bell was the first to transmit the vibrant thump
of a newborn's heartbeat,
and her diaphragm the last to touch the breast
of a dying mother.

She and I have united
to triumph over the x-ray machine,
to discover a heart murmur,
to distinguish pneumonia from pulmonary edema,
to comfort the distressed with a healing touch.

In the austere halls of this hospital,
she has listened to my own heart pound
over 100 million times,
brushing aside those skipped beats,
my moments of self-doubt.

Anne K Merritt

Correspondence to Anne Merritt, 757 Orange St #3, New Haven, CT 06511, USA; akmerritt@gmail.com

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Published Online First 16 February 2011

J Med Ethics; Medical Humanities 2011;**37**:57. doi:10.1136/jmh.2010.005520