Wearing Her Heart On Her Sleeve

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Medicine offers you a front-row seat on life. Meaning is all around you. When you can see it, it gives you a sense of gratitude for the opportunity to do this work.
-Rachel Naomi Remen

The first-year medical student cried openly during the session. Not hard, but enough to be embarrassed.

“I’m really sorry,” she said, “but this is one of the things that scares me most about going into medicine. I cry all the time. When I get the least bit upset, the tears flow. I can’t help it. How can I be a doctor if I am crying all the time?”

She reached for a tissue and looked at me.

“What do you think?” I asked her. “Are you worried that you are too compassionate?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she decided, “but how can I take care of sick people like this?”

As a profession, we physicians are rarely accused of being overly empathetic despite the oaths we swear as we enter our careers *(“May I see in all who suffer only the fellow human being…”).* Even when we strive to be consistently caring, our execution often falls short, yielding to the pressures of our own lives and the need to get long lists of tasks accomplished. There is no shortage of real or imagined pressures that physicians blame for the loss of compassion just as there is no shortage of criticisms that patients fire back at physicians and at those of us who are helping to educate the next generation of doctors.

At its most fundamental level, is there a way to improve the doctor-patient relationship? An essay in the *New York Times* [1] by chronicler of social innovation, David Bornstein, explores one approach that medical schools, including our own, utilize to help students fight the natural urge to become more-and-more emotionally detached from patients as they become physicians.

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