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and set my bones ablaze.

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SEEING PATIENTS

Henry Huson, Class of 2017

I remember that sound. It's one of those things you can never forget, a sound of complete fear, a scream that could pierce the sky like a beacon calling out for help. It rattled me inside. It shook the confidence that I had built since starting medical school, seeing patients week after week. There I stood, facing a closed door with a simple peek of light escaping through the jamb. I wanted to turn around in retreat from the patient on the other side. I took a moment to breathe. Filling my lungs with the cool air in the office, I tried not to imagine all of the pain, destruction, sorrow and misery that awaited me. I batted away the images that filled my head and set my bones ablaze. I waited for the fear to subside. Gathering my spirits off of the floor, I placed my hand on the knob and stepped in.

I had spent the past week seeing child after child with a wide range of ailments, but this child was different. This wasn't a child in pain. This didn't involve blood, or vomit, or sickness. This was panic. As this child flailed wildly around the room with tears slipping down her cheeks and onto the paper on the exam table, I had missed it. We are all taught the importance of that first observation, to glance at our patients and try to grasp the situation. My observation had failed me. While I saw the tears and movement, I missed her eyes, eyes searching for the world but failing to find resolution. I had met my first blind patient, all of 6 years in this world, never knowing its beauty, and my fear returned.

As I opened my mouth and waited for the words to slip past my teeth, her mother interjected. It was an apology. The last thing I would have ever imagined. She stood before me grasping at her daughter, trying to hold her close and comfort her, while throwing "sorry" my way like darts at a board. My tongue twisted and turned and found itself tied, leaving me speechless

and standing there alone. While the screaming was loud, my own silence was deafening. I was left frozen, pondering my next move and needing a moment to myself. I took the time to process, not only the scene around me, but also my own fear, my own urge to escape. Taking this time, I was able to refocus and began to listen.

The mother began the story as if opening up the book that encompassed her daughter's life. While routinely visiting the office for her annual checkup and vaccinations, there was always a difficulty. This little girl enjoyed every moment she spent with her mother, hanging on her leg, a pillar keeping her upright in the world. Yet when the door of the home opened, everything changed. As the outside environment beeped, honked and whistled, this little girl found herself alone, not knowing what awaited her with each step forward. She hated each time she had to visit the doctor, hearing new voices surround her but always feeling isolated. While we all grew up learning faces—reading these masks that we wear to display our emotion and intentions—she lived in a world of absence.

That was when I felt it, a clarity that washed over me like sunlight. I inched closer, monitoring each step with the trepidation that one can only feel when walking on embers. When I found myself in front of her, I reached out. Feeling the abyss as my hands passed through, I found hers. In a swift motion, I brought them to rest upon my face. The screaming stopped. The tears were suddenly held behind the floodgates of her eyes. She played. Combing her hands through my beard and along the nooks and crannies of my features, she became an artist painting a portrait with her fingers. While she may never see it with her eyes, she had found my face, a face she could attach to a voice that was new to her and initially scary. This face



PATIENTS' PERCEPTIONS

Camilo Fernandez-Salvador, MD

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lifted that fear, and with it, brought out the playful little girl her mother was the only witness to. While she relaxed upon finding my face, my own tension subsided when I found her smile.

As a medical student passes through the training and the lectures, we are taught about 'the laying on of hands,' the original tool wielded by every physician across every generation and age. A tenet within medicine, it is one of the more powerful instruments we have at our disposal. It holds such high esteem and importance in the field of medicine, yet the concept is difficult for an early student to grasp. I had always understood what the words represented, but it was still just an idea, shrouded in fog and buried away for a later date. That day had finally come. I had stepped into a child's shoes and

assumed their role, if only for a moment, but that was all that was needed. I found the comfort and support that a human touch can bring not only for a patient but also for a physician. At the end of the visit, her mother thanked me. But I knew it was I who should be thanking them. This small, vibrant little girl had taught me a lesson no book ever could – that the art of medicine is not practiced by the 'white coat,' but by the human that lies beneath. ■

Henry Huson is a fourth year medical student who writes, "Lucky to be surrounded and taught by so many great people in my life, I have had my share of lessons. The best one I learned: Lend your voice to those who can't speak for themselves and always listen, their stories are better than any one that you can write."