

The Invisible Problem

Description

A sharing by Ann Toh and Ruth Lim

As trite and as cliched as this sounds, we need to remember one simple lesson —life is not as simple as it seems. As healthcare providers with a special window into our patients' lives, we need to learn to be slow to judge. As fellow travelers, we need to recognize that the world can be starved of kindness.

My House of Horrors

I remember my 10-year-old home care patient. I always call him Spider-Man. Spider-Man was the eldest of three children, a school prefect, and chronically ill with a severe respiratory condition.

Being his doctor was frustrating. We made home visits to review and treat and support and saw his mother fail to keep on top of his treatment regimen.

I subsequently found out that, on top of caring for a terminally-ill child and two rowdy toddlers, Spider-Man's mother had had to bear the brunt of domestic violence. All the home visits and the good rapport had not surfaced this issue. Life is not as simple as it seems.

——— Dr Ann Toh

Commentary

In the accompanying vignette, Spider-Man's mother assured us that she understood our instructions and knew how to administer his medications. The assurance was followed by a panicked telephone call after we had left her home, to tell us that she could not find Spider-Man's medications! Eventually we had to accept that Spider-Man's mother was unable to cope with caring for him at home, and arranged for admission to hospital. Even then, we only thought the mother was unreliable and in need of support, not anything more.

———*Dr Ann Toh*

A woman stands defiantly, her back straight and her fists clenched. But her lowered gaze betrays the pain she must be feeling. She is occupying the central position in the composition, but there is no escaping the outline of the faceless shadow that stands behind her.

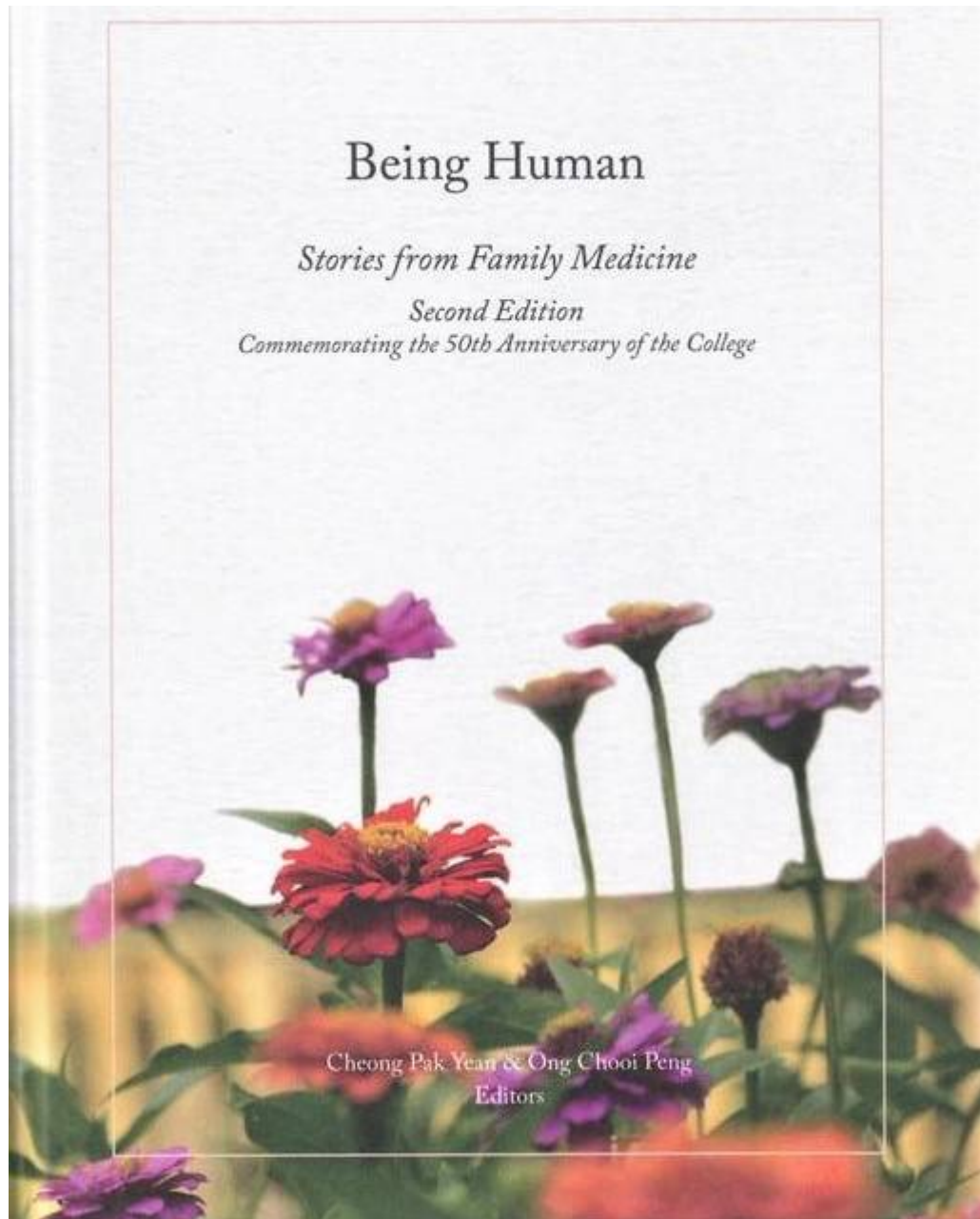
The wine glass is broken and overturned. We often associate wine glasses with celebration or pleasure, but this glass glints menacingly and is tinged with blood.

Domestic abuse can be common, but is hard to see.

———*Dr Ruth Lim*

Ann Toh is a Family Medicine resident who enjoys the privilege of caring for patients in the context of their real lives from cradle to grave, and feels that she is currently pursuing the heart of Medicine.

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The commentary and vignette were reproduced with permission from the book 'Being Human, Stories from Family Medicine' edited by Cheong Pak Yean and Ong. Hooi Peng and published in 2021 by the College of Family Physicians Singapore.

Pictures of illness experiences were drawn by NUS medical students in workshops conducted from 2012-2017 by A/Prof Cheong Pak Yean. Senior family physicians subsequently shared vignettes and commentaries based on the pictures.