

Hidden Curriculum in Silence

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Medical school drills facts into us—diagnoses, treatments, algorithms, and flowcharts engraved like sacred codes. The wards echo with alarms, case discussions, and hurried footsteps.

Amid this noise, what shaped me most were not the shouted lessons but the quiet ones—the breath held before bad news, the stillness after a code, and the gaze of a mother asking questions with no answer. These moments were not graded or guided, but they stayed pressed deep into the memory.

This hidden curriculum, spoken through silence, revealed the unknown unknowns of patient care: the subtleties of presence, restraint, and empathy that every patient teaches but no textbook names. I am still learning to recognize them, often clumsily and always earnestly.

I carry these whispered lessons within me—unscripted, ungraded, and unforgettable. Before becoming a doctor with knowledge, I realized I must first become a person with insight.

These lessons began in preclinical classrooms, deepened at the bedside, and matured through reflection.

ANATOMY: NAMES

The anatomy lab pulsed with sound: scalpels scraping, trays rattling, voices murmuring. My first incision was on a body I called “it.” Weeks later, a classmate said “she.” That quiet shift jolted me. No professor lectured on honoring the person beneath the cadaver, but that unintentional naming restored reverence where routine had eroded it.

BEDSIDE: PRESENCE

In my second year, I shadowed an oncologist known for blunt honesty. We encountered a woman with stage IV breast cancer; her partner clutched her hand, fear palpable. The word “metastatic” reverberated through the room. The doctor opened his mouth and paused. For 30 seconds, he said nothing, his eyes steady on their shared dread. Then softly: “Heavy truths need light words—and strong silence.”

DEATH: STILLNESS

No one truly prepares us for death. Platitudes—“Be there, say little”—feel hollow until faced. A patient coded on my watch; alarms screamed, then stopped. The silence that followed was heavier than any sound. A nurse smoothed the sheet, eyes downcast. I stood frozen. Later, with wordless kindness, she handed me a glass of water.

SURGERY: TRUST

Surgery moves like choreography—tools in sync and motions purposeful. During a splenectomy, the patient’s pressure suddenly decreased. “Pressure’s down,” the anesthetist said calmly. No chaos—only glances, quiet precision, and trust in motion. The surgeon murmured, “A strong team doesn’t need chatter.”

MISTAKES: HUSH

One night, a senior resident missed a faint ST elevation. The patient experienced an infarction in the morning. The ward slowed down; charts were checked twice. The silence that followed was not avoidant; it was accountability.

FAMILIES: GRIEF

A mother asked, “Will my son pull through?” His vitals were fading. I sat beside her as she cried and passed the tissue when the words failed. Later, she whispered, “Thank you for being there.” Presence mattered more than explanation.

HANDOVER: STANDARDS

The first year was a blur—admissions, orders, codes, and exhaustion. During one handover, a resident joked about a dying patient: “He’s toast.” No one laughed. The silence that followed set the tone—we do not do that. Later, a senior reminded us, “Words matter, even in fatigue.”

SELF: PAUSE

After a shift, cases looped in my head—Did I miss something? Was I too brisk? Silence can be both comfort and confrontation. The inner quiet becomes a mirror, showing doubts and growth. Sometimes mentors and patients reflect on what we cannot yet see ourselves.

MORAL DISTRESS: STILLNESS

One patient had a DNR order; the family begged for resuscitation. The intern began CPR; the attending physician said, firmly but gently, “Stop.” The word cut through alarms with calm authority. The room stilled. The family wept; the patient passed. Later, the intern sobbed, “I feel like I killed him.” The resident sat beside her, silent and steady.

CURRICULUM: HUMANITY

OSCEs, logbooks, and presentations are graded. But no one grades the hand you hold, the fear you sit with, or the voice you soften before hard news. Medicine builds skills; silence builds humanity—fragile, complex, and deeply necessary. In the hush after a shift, when noise falls away, I return to silence within—not just as a clinician, but as a person learning how to care.

CONCLUSION

Silent moments, once uncomfortable, became the core of my clinical education: gentle pauses before truth, after loss, and alongside uncertainty.

Early in training, I worried that stretches of silence marked an absence, but bedside experience revealed their true purpose—they make space for patient and caregiver alike to breathe and gather strength.

In stillness, I learned that care is less about intervention and more about genuine presence. Sometimes, comfort is offered not in words, but in sitting quietly with a grieving family or holding a patient’s hand in hope—a hesitant squeeze or a shared glance assuring “you are not alone.” These unscripted gestures quietly gather compassion and foster empathy.

Guided by mentors and inspired by patients’ dignity, I found that empathy flourishes where words fall short. Kindness lingers in memory, subtle yet profound.

Ultimately, silence itself has become a form of healing—steady, sustaining, and real. In listening without agenda and being present with intention, I honor the humanity at medicine’s heart.

“Silence is the language of God; all else is poor translation.”

—Rumi

Conceptualization
Methodology
Resources
Validation
Writing – original draft

Writing – review and editing

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None

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the affiliated institution.

PRESENTATIONS

None

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