NUS student’s poem about cancer patient bags top prize from journal

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Inspired by an encounter with an elderly patient with colorectal cancer, medical student Faye Ng wrote a poem mining about the trials and tribulations behind the scenes.

Last month, her piece, A Pink Grace, won the top poetry prize handed out by one of the world’s most widely-cited medical journals.

She is the first undergraduate to receive this honour which is given to the best poem published in Annals of Internal Medicine each year.

The medical journal is one of a handful that devote space to reflective writing and poems usually by physicians.

Ms Ng, 24, a fourth-year undergraduate at the National University of Singapore’s Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, gained the poem several months after meeting the elderly man in the general surgery ward during her posting at a hospital for surgical training in 2020.

The man, in his 70s, had late-stage colorectal cancer, and the disease had spread to other parts of his body.

“His was very much akin to a recluse and didn’t really want to talk to doctors. I tried to befriended him and I was curious to know more about his condition,” Ms Ng recalled.

“One day, he opened up a bit to me and showed me some of his scores from previous operations, impaired by her conversations with him, she wrote the poem and submitted it to the journal in May last year, after some encouragement from a friend.

She was happy enough if she got published in December, so checking the website was an afterthought.

She does not know what happened to the man after she completed her posting, as medical students do not usually stay in touch with patients.

Ms Ng, whose parents are teachers, will be entering the USMLE in September to the National University Hospital (NUH) Children’s Fund, which supports needy patients of the KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital.

She said she started writing poetry in secondary school, after a friend in her school’s humanities programme introduced her to the field.

As a science student who planned to read medicine, she pursued her interest in poetry on the sidelines through the Ministry of Education’s Creative Arts Programme, a week-long intensive writing seminar for budding writers.

She was also mentored by local poet Desmond Kon and later attended Sing Lit Station’s Manuscript Bootcamp twice while in medical school.

“I write in bursts… If I feel inspired by something, I just write it down then I’ll write,” said Ms Ng, who hopes to compile her best works in a manuscript collection.

She loves poets like “glass jars” in which he keeps some of the most memorable experiences in his life.

Her interest in medical-themed poetry grew in university, and she took reference from physicians such as the late British neurologist Oliver Sacks, the late Sir William Osler, a Canadian physician, and the late American neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi, who battled cancer.

She also enjoys reading works by American poets Harry O. and Aila Lamp, among others.

In a statement, Dr Michael Lee, editor in chief of Annals of Internal Medicine and editor of its poetry section, said Ms Ng’s poem was described by the judges as “overwhelming because we find that medicine is not just our profession as we thought but it’s more than that.”

Ms Ng, who will be graduating from medical school next year, added: “It is like surgery, it is very easy to be overwhelmed by medical facts and get so caught up with the details and the treatment that we forget the patient behind the sickness. In medicine, you can see so much of the struggles of humanity and you think a lot about what it means to be alive, what it means to be human.”

Ms Ng’s poem can be found here: https://www.aamjournal.org/doi/10.1001/jama.2023-01-2223