



I MET YOU FOR THE FIRST TIME TODAY AND YOU WERE DEAD

XANTHE CROSS

I attended my first reflective writing course when I was a registrar, not long after starting my final year of GP training. In my group was an experienced GP, Jim, who shared a piece of writing that began 'I met you for the first time today and you were dead'. Not long afterwards I was working a weekend out-of-hours shift with a trainer and we were called to certify a death.

I don't tend to do much writing other than on the courses but in this case the situation reminded me of the opening line that Jim had written and I was moved to write my own piece.

An out-of-hours GP might often be required to certify the death and when the computer case summary stated 'Expected Death', the last thing I expected to see was a tube, the remnants of a resuscitation attempt, protruding from his mouth. So, the real need for me to write on this occasion was to reflect on this man's death and to think about how it could have been different, not only for him and his family, but also for the paramedics who were obliged to try and resuscitate him. It made me want to try and ensure that my future patients and their families were adequately prepared; with Do Not Resuscitate orders in place and the local ambulance service informed.

As a profession, we are expected to do difficult things. Sharing this writing acknowledged this and helped me to remember that I am not alone in what I do. Also, even if the situations we find ourselves in are not perfect and unsuitable events have preceded our involvement, we can still do our best to help patients and families at that point in time.

Jim, whose opening line I shamelessly borrowed, has himself since died. I hope that his death was as he would have wanted.

I met you for the first time today and you were dead.

I met you for the first time today and you were dead. Lung cancer, expected death the computer had said. The furniture and all the plants were pushed to the edge of the room. A brown envelope FAO GP propped against your side. The tube a stark message of what had gone before.

They asked to stay as I went through the ritual. I took the torch to shine into your eyes, but as I opened your lids wider the grey film told me all I needed to know. I shone the light in where once life had shone out. Your prominent ribs meant the stethoscope could not lie flat against your silent chest. As I listened to nothing I saw the prayer cards in the top pocket of your blue cotton pyjamas.

I wanted to straighten your clothes, your white vest had been pulled up and your buttons were open. Instead I tugged ineffectually at the top of the blanket. A small mark of respect, to regain some dignity perhaps, now the paramedics had gone.

They nodded when I asked if I should remove the tube. My back was turned to them as I drew the air from the cuff. The small syringe meant it took several turns for the smooth plastic to wrinkle. The gauze had been knotted so I picked patiently to loosen it before sliding it back under your head. It was too white, too clean and clinical in your home. The tube came out easily. I gently peeled off the ECG stickers from your shoulders too. They were blue and white like the tube. I folded them all into my gloves as I removed them, turned inside out, hiding what should not have been there. The ridges in your vest bothered me again, but it wasn't my place to straighten it, so I pulled at the blanket once more.

They were grateful I think. Your grandson stoical, guilty that he had slept well in his own bed that night rather than beside you as before. Your brother with quiet tears. Other pairs of eyes coming and going, listening, touching. A close family. Neat. With faith.

The stairs down were steep and the shoes, lots of shoes, were in tidy rows beside the door.

Thank you doctor. Thank you.

Email responses from other GPs in the Reflective Writing Group

Reflective Writing for General Practitioners

Thank you, Xanthe. Reading this makes me feel we are developing into a community, I hope a community that offers support to its members. Thank you for sharing this. It is simple, acutely observed, and makes me feel that I was there more than a picture would do.

Jen

Thankyou, Xanthe. It is the details you write about that make this piece so powerful. It is unsentimental but with powerful emotions ... if that makes sense. Thank you for sharing it.

Jonathan

Xanthe – this is so touching and evocative. The observed details of the man's protruding ribs, his open pyjama buttons, that distressingly crumpled vest and all those shoes lined up by the door as you left ... all these confirm to me that you were being very much more than just a medically qualified verifier of the expiration of life. In noticing all those small things you must yourself have been observed as a doctor with both decency and humanity – and I am certain that tenderness will have been felt by the gathered family. It is always such a bizarre situation to find oneself in – but I have no doubt your tact and gentleness will have made a very difficult time just that little bit less so for the family – through your kind manner and simple actions. Thank you for sharing your experience – very powerful writing so keep it up!

Lucy

Dear Xanthe

What a fine piece – I can see it all clearly and the writing brings a tear to the eye. No problem at all using my opening line – it sets things up nicely and gives power to the description of the ritual examination with which we are all so familiar.

Love to all

Jim