Paper Dolls

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Artist's Statement:

My mom tried to kill herself at age 16 by taking an entire bottle of aspirin. This was a serious suicide attempt and she required hospitalization. However, she was in a psychiatric hospital for an extended length of time, which was not therapeutic for her. On the few occasions she has gone in depth with me about that time in her life, she recalled a delusional patient who thought he was Jesus holding her hand warmly and saying, "You are not crazy. You do not need to be here." This reminds me of D. L. Rosenhan's [1] experiment of 'sane' people having themselves admitted to psychiatric hospitals in the 1970s by feigning auditory hallucinations. The 'pseudopatients' immediately stopped feigning symptoms at admission and were hospitalized for a range of 7 to 52 days. Although the doctors and nurses did not recognize that the 'pseudopatients' were not seriously mentally ill, the other patients did recognize this and would often ask the 'pseudopatients' if they were journalists or administrators checking up on the hospital.

This poem spans two generations. I am an academic psychiatrist working in an outpatient clinic. I love teaching and I love that I get to spend real time with my patients. I get to know them as whole people and, often, see them get well. During and for a few years after residency when I worked in inpatient psychiatry or psychiatric emergency departments, I knew I was keeping my patients physically safe, but worried I was failing them on many other levels when taking away their rights, their belongings, and, sometimes, their humanity.

In writing this poem, I was thinking about psychiatry in the 1970s and today. In our current era of unending documentation, fear of litigation, more checklists and less and less time with our patients, we have unintentionally headed away from patient care. This is not a problem in one hospital, one state or one field of medicine; it is a national issue. We need a larger dialog on national policy to head back to the *care* aspect of patient care.

Paper Dolls

My mother tells me she once wore a paper dress as a child,
Brought home lovingly by her father from faraway lands.
She was careful not to tear it,
Just as you are now,
As you sit in your paper scrubs,
Far too big.

Adjusting them gingerly with your youthful hands.
As a little girl, my mother loved paper dolls,
She would dress them and undress them with great care.
She never tore one.
They didn't have a lot.
You don't have a lot now.

They took your keys, your purse, your phone,
Oh, you're a grad student? How nice.
No hardcover books here – place them in the bag.
No shoe laces.
That's so dangerous!
Get undressed, door ajar, you can never be too safe.

My mother was a daughter lost circling in sadness once, too.
She swallowed a whole bottle of pain killers,
And came to a place like this.
She didn't flourish there, either.
Khaki green walls. Screams echoing.
All the ice cream you can eat.

Either way, brighten up,
Your dinner tray is ready.
Rate your pain, please.
How did you sleep?
Tell me the date.
Who is the president?

Excellent. Here are your pills.
Don't you feel better already?
Don't pull on your sleeve, sweetie.
You might tear it.
It's fragile.
We have a limited supply.

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Reference

1. Rosenhan D. On Being Sane in Insane Places. *Science*. 1974;197(4070):250–8. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-017738-0.50055-7>.